

WOMONSPACE: BUILDING A LESBIAN COMMUNITY
IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA, 1970-1990

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the methods used by one group of women to increase the social spaces available to Edmonton lesbians. Ultimately, this paper analyzes the contributions of social space to community identity. In this case, Edmonton's longest running lesbian organization "Womonspace" serves as a unique testament to the importance of social methods for strengthening a sense of community identity. In 1981, the founders of "Womonspace" set out to provide lesbians with a safe place in which to socialize and to foster a positive lesbian identity.

The impetus for a growing lesbian organization came in part from a shared sense of oppression from both straight feminist groups and sexist gay male organizations. The mandate of the group stressed safeguarding the privacy of its members. Womonspace organizers believed that overt political involvement discouraged closeted lesbians from joining the group. Thus, organizers did not adopt a political agenda. Not every member agreed with this policy. However, the goal of building a community and increasing social networks for lesbians called for a reasonable alternative to the more public face of activism. Ultimately, the efforts of Womonspace strengthened the visibility of Edmonton's once scattered and indiscernible lesbian population.

Dances provided the central social event followed by a number of other leisure activities. Word of mouth, along with a monthly newsletter, kept lesbians abreast of social happenings in and around Edmonton. Before long, the organization attracted women from both the city and from nearby rural areas. Thus, Womonspace expanded and transformed the cultural development

of lesbian networks.

This study of the phenomenon of building a lesbian community argues that historians neglect the significance of social space upon gay and lesbian organizing. Much historical attentiveness towards the more outstanding issues and outcomes of political reform, activism, and the struggle for gay rights, exceeds the issue of building a viable, visible gay/lesbian community through the appropriation of social space. In addition, historical inquiry into gay history tends to examines gay community history from the male perspective. In Canada, lesbian history lags far behind gay male history.

The work of such predominant and influential Canadian historians as Gary Kinsman and Steven Maynard has substantially increased understanding of the politics of same-sex gender relations particularly gay male history. A thorough historical inquiry of lesbian culture in Canada is lacking, even more so in terms of Western Canada. By investigating Alberta's largest and most successful autonomous lesbian organization, this thesis will encourage other scholars to do similar studies.

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Of course, I am grateful to the Department of History for supporting my work, and providing me with two Graduate Teaching Fellowships, as well as two separate Messer Funds allowing travel to Edmonton to meet with participants of this study, collect oral interviews, and search the public archives for supporting material.

University of Saskatchewan librarian Neil Richards deserves special recognition here for accumulating a large gay and lesbian source made available to the Saskatoon Public Archives in the form of "The Neil Richards Papers." This source contains an amazing range of material associated with gay and lesbian events, coalitions, committees, and personal papers of donors. Richards, recipient of the 1998 Doug Wilson Award for advancing the rights of gays and lesbians attending the University of Saskatchewan, is commended for his vision and foresight in compiling an invaluable archive on Prairie Canadian lesbian and gay history. As well, Edmonton City Counselor Michael Phair, was instrumental in the organizing of a gay and lesbian archive housed at the City of Edmonton Public Archives. Both of these sources contain valuable information for scholars of queer history in Western Canada.

I would like to thank all my oral sources for sharing their recollections and experiences with Womonspace and the Edmonton lesbian community of twenty-years ago. These women envisioned a safe space in which to meet, socialize, and enhance lesbian visibility. All Womonspace participants identified a need to shape the lesbian community they inhabit and eliminate social and political barriers experienced by most lesbians. This thesis is dedicated to the expressions of lesbian experience in Western Canada. Lastly, but not least of all, I want to thank my family and my partner for their continuing support.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Dr. Barry G. Lucas, professor emeritus of the University of Saskatchewan, formerly with the Department of Educational Administration. He truly is an inspiration and the greatest supporter of the completion of this thesis. Escaping the academic halls for the open road, my father now prefers his BMW motorcycle to a shirt and a tie. My mom graciously shares his passion for new adventures. To you, Dad.

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INTRODUCTION

A THEORETICAL EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY FORMATION IN RECENT LESBIAN CANADIAN HISTORY

In Canada as elsewhere, the majority of historical and scholarly work analyzes gay history from the male perspective. Frequently, writers classify lesbianism alongside gay male homosexuality in a binary comparison, despite distinct differences between them. In the history of homosexuality, the category of lesbian history has considerably less representation than that of gay male history.¹ In general, gay men and lesbians share one feature in common— their homosexuality. But as Annamarie Jagose, English professor at the University of Melbourne, observes, “the gendering of that sexuality has produced substantial cultural differences between them.”² According to gay historian Jeffrey Weeks:

Lesbianism and male homosexuality in fact have quite different, if inevitably interconnected, social histories, related to the social evolution of distinct gender identities; there is a danger that this fundamental, if difficult, point will be obscured by discussing them as if they were part of the same experience.³

¹Becki L. Ross, *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 7.

²Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1996), 44.

³Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality and Identity* (London: River Oram Press, 1996), 14.

In particular, lesbians, by various terms of reference, are mostly invisible in society.⁴

This thesis examines Womonspace, a lesbian organization located in Edmonton, Alberta. The organization was primarily concerned with creating a positive identity and building a visible community. This chapter explores the relationship between lesbian identity, social contributions, and community. It also shows how definitions of lesbianism have evolved in the last few decades to include self-definitions of lesbians. In more recent years, an important shift towards greater diversity attests to far more complex changing definitions of lesbian life that does not ignore competing identities.

As Canadian historian Becki Ross, professor at the University of British Columbia, concludes from her research on lesbian history in Canada: “A primary focus to date is the construction of lesbian identity and the development of lesbian subcultures.”⁵ In the process of claiming public space for themselves, lesbians create a collective identity based on difference. Elements of experience, social affiliation, cultural differences, class, and self-awareness comprise the essential basis of identity formation.

Lesbian experience encompasses the private and public aspects of both individual and group behaviour exhibited by lesbians in particular times and places, past and present. Consequently, queer historian Rictor Norton’s suggests that: “Lesbian historiography may require a concept of sexuality more broadly based than narrow genital sexuality, a greater focus upon isolated pair-bonding than upon sub-cultural networking, and a greater necessity for employing

⁴ Lisa M. Walker, “How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are,” *Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society* 18, no.4 (1993): 881.

⁵ Ross, 7.

hypothetical models.”⁶ Thus, as psychologist Janis Bohan contends, lesbianism is not a mere biological or chromosomal category of homosexuality; instead, it is a non-deviant socio-cultural phenomenon of exclusively female experience.⁷ Unfortunately, heterosexism is grounded in the belief that heterosexuality is the only socially acceptable sexual orientation, thereby reinforcing negative views towards same-sex desires.⁸ In this way, heterosexism relegates gays and lesbians to a deviant category outside of socially acceptable norms.⁹ Since the 1960s, social theorists have come to see sexual desires and behaviours as central to identity construction and individuality.

In recent years, researchers of sexuality have proposed two competing viewpoints, essentialist theory and social constructionism.¹⁰ Essentialist theory views gender and sexuality as biologically fixed categories. As social historian Adrien Stein explains:

Researchers believed that homosexual preference was the surface manifestation of an underlying homosexual orientation, that homosexuality was in essence a fixed characteristic that determines emotions, desires, behaviors—whether the individual is conscious of “being homosexual” or not.¹¹

The essentialist theory presupposes sexuality as an inherent feature that exists within the

⁶ Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London: Cassell, 1997), 180.

⁷ Janis S. Bohan, *Psychology and Sexual Orientation: Coming to Terms* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 35.

⁸ Bohan, 38.

⁹ Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 10.

¹⁰ Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: A Plume Book, 1996), 170-173.

¹¹ Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 10.

individual independent of social or cultural factors. According to essentialist theory, a self-conscious identification with a lesbian or gay identity is of secondary importance since homosexuality is a fixed category.¹² In contrast to social construction theory, essentialists view sexuality as inherent and constant. The essentialist viewpoint suggests sexuality is determined at birth.

By contrast, social constructionist theory recognizes that gender and sexuality are situated within particular historical and cultural perspectives of given times and places.¹³ Thus, social theorists question the underlying meanings of heterosexuality itself, and the presumption of unnaturalness of homosexuality merely because of the social sanction of heterosexuality. Adherents of social theories point to two of the most influential modern sexual theorists: Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey. Freud's psychoanalytical theory of sexual identity disputes the inherent essential 'nature' of sexuality. Freud saw sexual identity as originating in childhood experiences. Lesbianism was attributed to various unconscious drives, penis envy, and/or stemming from an 'Oedipus complex.'¹⁴ Despite some of his more controversial and far-fetched theories, Freud traced sexual patterns to social experiences and not to human 'nature.' Freud saw individual sexual behaviour in terms of socialization.

In the 1950s, Alfred Kinsey's study of the sexual behaviour of Americans refuted the notion of fixed sexual categories. Kinsey found greater variation in the sexual practices of

¹² Annmarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

¹³ Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996), 27.

¹⁴ Tasmin Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 70.

Americans than commonly believed.¹⁵ Constructionists understand that rigid gender and sexual roles serve to reinforce prescribed cultural norms. Social constructionist theory emphasizes the shifting, fluid character of sexual orientation.

Supporters of social construction claim that the origins of the modern lesbian identity originate in the work of the sexologists and psychologists. Medical and psychological discourses first identified and labeled the sexual behaviour of homosexuals as different from heterosexuals. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, psychologists located lesbians within developmental models of pathology. Medical models assumed a model of normality from which lesbians deviated.¹⁶ Sexologists defined sexual identities in relation to dominant sexual codes. Relatively narrow social meanings ascribed to lesbianism have subjected female homosexuals to unwarranted restrictive characterizations. Few women publically declared themselves lesbians because of the negative social meanings attached to same-sex desire.

As writer Tasmin Wilton notes:

Lesbian-ness is a product of the shifting relationships among individual subjectivity, the body and the social (including kinship, sub-cultural groups, etc.) And of meanings constituted by/within those relationships.¹⁷

In other words, lesbians do not fulfill normative gender role expectations.

Gay historian Jeffrey Weeks writes: "Sexology, then, is not simply descriptive. It is at times profoundly prescriptive, telling us [individuals] what we ought to be like, what makes us

¹⁵ See Alfred C. Kinsey, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia and London: W.B. Saunders, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1953).

¹⁶ Wilton, 31.

¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

truly ourselves and “normal.”¹⁸ In volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, French historian Michel Foucault argues that heterosexuality and homosexuality are relatively recent classification systems for organizing human sexual experiences.¹⁹ According to Foucault, around 1870 various medical discourses emerged identifying individuals who participated in same-sex acts.²⁰

Writer and historian Jonathan Katz attests to the “invention” of heterosexuality by probing the making of heterosexual/ homosexual identities. Social theorists demonstrate that the labeling of certain individuals in relation to sexual patterns serves as a social function to separate homosexual persons from the dominant population.²¹ According to Katz: “The terms heterosexuality and homosexuality signify historically specific ways of naming, thinking about, valuing, and socially organizing the sexes and their pleasures.”²² The construction of such narratives results in the pathologizing of homosexual persons by magnifying differences between gay and straight people.²³ Thus, sexuality became another means of categorizing human behaviour similar to race, gender, and class. Participating in same-sex eroticism became the primary basis for labeling people rather than certain activities homosexual. Consequently, it was only after the late nineteenth century that a homosexual identity emerged rather than a set of

¹⁸ Weeks, 74.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1 An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage Book Edition, 1990), 43.

²⁰ Ibid., 118.

²¹ Stein, 10.

²² Katz, 12.

²³ Stein, 11.

sexual acts and behaviours labeled a homosexual act.²⁴ Social construction theory emphasizes the variability of sexuality. As lesbian history writer Sheila Jeffreys observes, “There can never be a fixed definition of what it means to be a lesbian.”²⁵ The socio-cultural meanings attached to sexual behaviour are historically situated. Thus, social theorists question binaries such as homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, gender roles, and patriarchal norms.

In recent years, evolving definitions of lesbianism have shifted the value and meaning of what is socially acceptable. For example, homophile organizations active in the 1940s and 1950s sought to educate the public by opening up their meetings to “experts” in the hope of minimizing differences between gays and straights.²⁶ These groups sought public understanding by emphasizing their affinities to the dominant population to offset their sexual dissimilarities. In contrast to the assimilation stance of early homophile groups, gay liberation propelled gays and lesbians to publicly proclaim their sexual identity with a sense of defiance and personal pride.²⁷ Such a move towards self-determination radicalized the meaning of coming out of the “closet.” As Stein puts it, “By the 1970s, lesbianism was viewed as a matter of total personal identity rather than as primarily a sexual condition; it was regarded as subject to choice and changeable in definition rather than as a given.”²⁸

²⁴ Foucault, 101.

²⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, “Does it Matter if They Did it?” in *Not a Passing Phrase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History*, ed. *Lesbian History Group* (London: Women’s Press, Ltd., 1993), 14.

²⁶ D’Emilio, 109.

²⁷ Ross, 31.

²⁸ Stein, 13.

The search for personal identity and the work of “identity politics” owe much to the counter-cultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁹ Identity is a process that involves making a connection between the individual, culture, community, and establishing a sense of self. The arrival of second wave women’s liberation marked a new exploration into identity, sexuality, and the stereotyping of women that reinforced male privilege.³⁰ Lesbians who came out in the 1970s, or shortly thereafter, constructed identity in relation to feminist ideology. As gay historian John D’Emilio explains:

The feminist movement offered the psychic space for many women to come to a self-definition as lesbian. Women’s liberation was in its origins a separatist movement, with an ideology that defined men as the problem and with organizational forms from consciousness-raising groups to action-oriented collectives that placed a premium on female solidarity. As women explored their oppression together, it became easier to acknowledge their love for other women.³¹

Lesbian-feminists adopted consciousness-raising techniques to create a lifestyle that upheld women-identified-women relationships.³² As a result, many women saw their lesbianism as political and chose other women as partners to protest patriarchy and male dominance.

The gradual development of lesbian subcultures along with greater cultural productivity increased lesbian visibility. Outgrowths of the gay and lesbian liberation movement are the coming

²⁹ Doug Owsram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 249.

³⁰ Carl B. Holmberg, *Foundations of Popular Culture 6* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 60.

³¹ D’Emilio, 236.

³² Becki L. Ross, “How Lavender Jane Loved Women: Re-figuring Identity-based Life/Stylism in 1970s Lesbian Feminism,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1995-96): 110-128.

out stories, lesbian periodicals, and greater cultural productivity. Gay liberation stressed the importance of coming out publicly. The call for greater visibility fused the personal with the political.³³ According to Arlene Stein, the 1970s and early 1980s “emphasized the common experiences of coming out, of building a subculture based upon gender separatism, and of developing a positive sense of identity to counter stigma.”³⁴ It is significant that this process represents a communicated conscious identity on the part of the individual, as opposed to one ascribed by observers. No longer was it possible for researchers to study the lesbian in terms of a deviant personality.

Furthermore, lesbian sexuality does not constitute the primary identification among lesbians. Lillian Faderman, writer and a professor of English, argues: “ ‘Lesbian’ describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Evidence of lesbianism may include eroticism, passion, or intense emotions. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree or may be entirely absent.”³⁵ A broader inclusion of relationships into the rubric of lesbianism is acceptable to the views of many feminists. However, as Sylvia Van Kirk, a Canadian historian, explains a de-sexualization in the definition of woman-to-woman relationships conflicts with the more radical feminist viewpoints that sees same-sex eroticism as the main proof of lesbian experience.³⁶ The

³³ D’Emilio, 236.

³⁴ Stein, 15.

³⁵ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1985), 17-18.

³⁶ Sylvia Van Kirk, “What has the Feminist Perspective Done for Canadian History?” in *Knowledge Reconsidered: A Feminist Overview* (Toronto: Canadian Research Institute for

philosophical basis of lesbian feminist history construction links the interface between patriarchy and discourse on sexuality.

In recent decades, feminist presses and the emergence of lesbian history projects helped to formalize feminist lesbian history. As feminist writer Elaine Miller explains: "It [lesbianism] is concerned with women who loved and were loved by women in the context of feminist resistance to patriarchy . . . [and] with women who loved each other passionately and sexually, whether or not this love was expressed through sexual contact"³⁷ Essentially, feminist movements promoted a broader definition of lesbian, especially in nonsexual dimensions. The changes made assisted in greater development of lesbian cultural history, since more attention was given to socio-cultural aspects of lesbian experiences.

The foundation of identity politics is the belief that all lesbians share a common identity. Lesbian-feminist of the 1970s emphasized the degree of solidarity among women, including their straight sisters. The term "woman-identified-woman" signaled a stance taken against the patriarchy.³⁸ It is clear, nevertheless, that identities are multiple and complex. However, the idea that any woman can be a lesbian despite a heterosexual past opened the door for more women to claim a lesbian identity. The feminist movement rested in the belief that all females share an identity as "women." Nevertheless, in the process of creating a women-identified community lesbian feminism downplayed differences such as culture and class. By maximizing a common

Advancement, 1982), 46.

³⁷ Elaine Miller, "Righting Our History," in *All the Rage: Reasserting Radical Lesbian Feminism*, ed. Lynne Harne and Elaine Miller (London: The Women's Press, Ltd., 1996), 118.

³⁸ Vera Whisman, "Identity Crises: Who is A Lesbian Anyway?" in *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* ed. Arlene Stein (New York: A Plume Book, 1993), 58.

lesbian identity, lesbian feminism controlled the ways in which an individual could be a lesbian. In so doing, lesbian-feminism ignored other competing identities, ethnic and racial affiliations, and thereby dismissing certain kinds of lesbian experience.³⁹

In a discussion concerning lesbian feminist theory, historian Katherine Arnup, a graduate of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, examines the development of lesbian feminist theory in the lesbian feminist movement. According to her, three theoretical developments evolved during this period in an attempt to explain the position of lesbians in the struggle for women's liberation. Radical lesbianism was the first current to emerge. This argument suggests that women's oppression originated from the influences of patriarchal structures of society. Feminists regarded heterosexual women as "selling out" their feminism by associating with men and sharing in their male privilege.⁴⁰ In this regard, lesbians served as the vanguard of the women's movement since they choose not to live with men.

The second theory refers to the lesbian rights perspective and identifies sexual orientation rather than gender as the major source of their oppression. This position entailed working alongside gay men to fight for civil and legal protection of all homosexual persons. The third major theoretical work of the 1970s views heterosexism as an institution. Adrienne Rich's article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" develops a critique of heterosexual ideologies that confined and regulated female sexuality.⁴¹ The compulsory heterosexuality

³⁹ Jagose, 65.

⁴⁰ Katherine Arnup, "Lesbian Theory," *The Lesbian issue Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation Sur La Recherche Feminist* XII, no.1 (March,1983): 53.

⁴¹ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no.4 (Summer,1980): 631-660.

perspective focuses on the institutions and legacies of heterosexuality itself. Rich proposes the most sweeping change in lesbian historical practices when she introduces her model of a “lesbian continuum” to include all woman-identified-woman experiences regardless of the sexual orientation or marital status of the women involved.⁴²

While this model invites investigation of a wide variety of possible lesbian experience, it also prompts over-generalization. Historical writer Joan Nestle, for one, criticizes Rich’s model since it nearly contends that emotions alone characterize lesbianism, more or less in denial or omission of sexuality.⁴³ Even so, this last theory calls for heterosexual feminists to examine the nature of their “sexual choice” and to accept that lesbians should not have to substantiate their orientation alone.⁴⁴ Lesbian-feminism challenges sexism and heterosexism by considering lesbian identity as both a lifestyle and a political choice.⁴⁵

During the period of counter-cultural movements, sociologists began to study lesbian identity as a counter-identity with the potential to address dominant sexual ideologies in a male-orientated society. Sociologist E.M. Ettorre attempts to recast the lesbian from a deviant personality to a counter-identity with the potential to disrupt standard social categories for women.⁴⁶ In this way, any social opposition including rejection and stigmatization experienced by

⁴² Ibid., 46.

⁴³ Joan Nestle, “Butch-Femme Roles: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” *Heresies* 12 (1981): 21.

⁴⁴ Arnup, 55.

⁴⁵ Faderman, 414.

⁴⁶ E.M. Ettorre, *Lesbians, Women & Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 34-35.

the individual lesbian is an act of defiance for all women regardless of sexual orientation. As

Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love's well-read book entitled *Sappho was a Right-On Woman: A*

Liberated View of Lesbianism published in 1972 proclaims:

Lesbianism is a way of living with the assumptions on the nature and meaning of the self; it constitutes a kind of statement of belief of independence and freedom for all females. Society denies itself the opportunity to learn more about women and how they can function by making the lesbian seal off her lesbianism in all interactions with society.⁴⁷

Ettorre compares the life experiences of the "out" lesbian to the closeted lesbian. The closet

causes lesbians to present a false persona to others affecting her self-concept. The out lesbian, on

the other hand, declares her lesbianism by defining herself in relation to an oppressed social group.

In doing so, she risks social disapproval and possible homophobic violence, but discovers a sense of security through her contact with other lesbians.

Individuals who identify as lesbian or gay construct their identities in relation to the particular cultural and historical contexts made available to them. In other words, as Arlene Stein points out:

Women make identities— but not exactly as they please. Individuals forming their sexual identity bring a sense of self that is at least partly formed, and in constructing a lesbian identity they use the accounts or repertoires of meaning, that are available.⁴⁸

The social construction theory on homosexuality owes much to feminism and the study of sex and gender roles. Radical lesbian-feminist theory emphasizes sexual choice making it possible for a greater number of women to identify with lesbianism. Individual sexual identities form with explicit links to relationships and culture rather than in isolation. However, individual differences

⁴⁷ Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love, *Sappho was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972), 65.

⁴⁸ Stein, 20.

remain and challenge the universal definitions of lesbianism upheld by radical feminists.

Any exploration of the dilemmas of identity must take into account an individual's identity in relation to a lesbian's community. Lesbian communities consist of the number of social settings in which individuals share in common feelings related to their lesbianism. The gradual development of lesbian subcultures along with greater cultural productivity supported the adoption of a positive lesbian identity. Sexual identities are not formed in isolation; they are explicitly linked to relationships, community, and culture. Thus, community is an ambiguous system of organizing smaller divisions of society into some sort of recognizable form for social, political, cultural or economic reasons. The degree to which an individual identifies with a community and the objectives of that community varies.

Since building a community was the goal of Womonspace, and many other lesbian groups coming of age during the 1970s and 1980s, a definition of community is necessary for understanding. Sociologist Susan Krieger defines the lesbian community as:

the range of groups in which the lesbian individual may feel a sense of camaraderie with other lesbians, a sense of support, shared understanding, shared vision, shared sense of self "as a lesbian" vis-à-vis the outside world." Some lesbian communities are geographically specific . . . ; some exist within institutions . . . ; some exist only in spirit; some are ideological . . . ; some [are] primarily social. All are groups in which an individual may share her distinctively lesbian way of being with other lesbians.⁴⁹

In essence, a lesbian identity constitutes both an internalized sense of self as lesbian and a social identification with a lesbian community.

While particular communities are supportive of individual differences, a lesbian may find herself overwhelmed by collective ideological directives. For instance, lesbians who do not

⁴⁹ Susan Krieger, "Lesbian Identity and Community: Recent Social Science Literature," *Signs* 8.2 (1982): 92.

conform to the political ideals of some lesbian-feminism groups may find themselves slighted. This is particularly true of lesbian groups that set out to define how a lesbian should look and act.

Lesbians who appear too feminine and can pass for straight may create suspicion in a group that advocates sameness in sexual style.⁵⁰ Femmes, unlike butches and lesbians who dress down, may not be accepted at face value.⁵¹ To this end, politically correct lesbian-feminists of the 1970s attempted to unite lesbians into a larger autonomous movement.

The vision of a collective lesbian-feminist movement embodied in the calls for a "Lesbian Nation" served to unify lesbians into a visible subculture. As Becki Ross writes, "Lesbian Nation" signified shared language, ideology, cultural capital (including symbols and aesthetics), and collective identity...."⁵² Lesbian-feminists communities affirmed individual identity and sometimes challenged a sense of individualism.⁵³ This is particularly true of radical lesbian-feminists whose ideologies make some actions politically incorrect. In her book, *The Mirror Dance: Identity in a Women's Community*, sociologist Susan Krieger examines the loss of self to group identity in a lesbian community. Krieger's study focuses on a lesbian social network active in the 1970s. Although the organization affirmed lesbian identity, it was a community of ideology which stressed cultural identification with the group. Krieger observes:

⁵⁰ Lisa M. Walker, "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are." *Signs* 18 no.4 (1993): 867.

⁵¹ Butch-Femme couples assumed erotic partnerships based on dress codes and sexual styles. Butch women adopted "masculine" attire and behaviour in relation to the traditionally "feminine" femme.

⁵² Ross, *The House that Jill Built* 16.

⁵³ Susan Krieger, *The Mirror Dance: Identity in a Women's Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 91.

Within a lesbian community. . . individuals constantly have to deal with the mirror images they present to each other and with the difficulty of developing a sense of self-identity that is different from the common identity that their group encourages.⁵⁴

In her essay, "How Lavender Jane Loved Women: Refiguring Identity-based Live/Stylism in 1970s Lesbian feminism," Becki Ross investigates the distinctive politics of identity formation as found in the Lesbian Organization of Toronto (LOOT). LOOT members waged an attack against classicism and rigid gender conformity by donning the appearance of "downward mobility." In addition, lesbian feminist periodicals reinforced identity-based politics in order to advance the ideals of an autonomous lesbian movement. According to Ross, "Naturally, it was presumed, by her politically correct dress, communal living, marginal jobs and LOOT membership, one could find the real lesbian and, correlatively, the real feminist."⁵⁵ Lesbians who did not conform to the correct codes were accused of selling out to the patriarchy. Individuals who strayed from the collective ideology lost the support of the group. As lesbian writer Lillian Faderman notes:

The lesbian-feminists of the 1970s attempted to create a transcendent lesbian identity in which all lesbians looked alike, ate alike, thought alike, loved alike. Since lesbians had never been uniform, lesbian-feminism's ideological rigidity was generally doomed to failure. But lesbian-feminists were successful in that they drew a good deal of public attention to lesbianism usually without disastrous results, since the liberal '70s permitted differences.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, not all lesbians became political activists or identified as lesbian-feminist. For instance, Womonspace loosely defined its objectives and did not adhere to a political agenda. By

⁵⁴ Krieger, 5.

⁵⁵ Ross, *How Lavender Jane Loved Women* 111.

⁵⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia Press, 1991), 292.

the mid 1980s and early 1990s, the notion of a singular collective identity embodied by "Lesbian Nation" came under attack by those who embraced their differences in what became known as "sex wars." Women of colour and a new generation of lesbians which included "lipstick" lesbians,⁵⁷ femmes, and dykes⁵⁸ challenged the de-sexualization of lesbianism and the conformity to a politically correct lesbianism.

Many have viewed lesbian-feminism as a largely white middle-class movement. As a result radical lesbian-feminist politics that dictated what was acceptable sexual behaviour, dress, and appearance came under attack. Writer Kath Weston comments: "Sex radicals, lesbian separatists, and lesbians of color all developed critiques of the larger movement that exposed the hierarchies embedded in the utopian vision of a single, overarching lesbian culture untouched by racism, classicism, or male values."⁵⁹ The politically correct lesbianism favoured by some lesbian-feminists obscured class and cultural differences.

Generally, some lesbians called into question the extent to which lesbian feminists theorized that lesbianism is independent of sexuality. However, the feminist movement opened new ground and offered women the space to identify as lesbian. By the 1980s, the lesbian

⁵⁷ Lipstick lesbians is a term that became popular in the 1980s during the so-called "sex-wars" to describe a certain cosmopolitan lesbian-chic adopted by some women in response to the de-sexualization of lesbian relationships.

⁵⁸ Originally the term "dyke" was a slang term referring to tribadism. During the 1950s "dyke" was used by some middle-class lesbians to describe the supposed rough character of working-class lesbians who frequented bars. By the 1970s, lesbians appropriated the term to include lesbians who advocated downward mobility and preferred an androgynous or butch appearance.

⁵⁹ Kath Weston, "Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America," *Signs* (August, 1993): 236.

community became increasingly diverse as lesbians of colour, disabled lesbians and older lesbians demanded to be heard within the larger lesbian community.⁶⁰ According to lesbian history writer Lillian Faderman, the 1980s, marked by a conservative swing in American politics, allowed for more moderate women to claim a place in the lesbian community. She suggests that middle-class women, older women, and professional women participated in greater numbers once the community became less imbued with radical feminism and political-correctness. As Whisman puts it: “In the end a lesbian must simply be any woman who calls herself one, understanding that we [women] place ourselves within that category, drawing and redrawing the boundaries in ever-shifting ways.”⁶¹ In essence, there is no one way of being a lesbian any more than there is one lesbian community.

Clearly, “lesbian community” does not imply shared values, experiences, or prospects, nor does it reflect constant group adherence. As social historian Gary Kinsman cautions: “This assumption of a common lesbian or gay identity—which emphasizes the unitary character of this identity—has stood in the way of recognizing and dealing with the many differences and lines of oppression within lesbian and gay community formation.”⁶² In an effort to solidify the gay and lesbian community, the gay and lesbian rights movement adopted an “ethnic” model that enabled minority status.⁶³ However, this very process constricted ethnic or racial communities within the gay movement. Lesbians and gays of colour frustrated by the uncritical adoption of a unitary gay

⁶⁰ Ibid., 288-289.

⁶¹ Ibid., 60.

⁶² Kinsman, 300.

⁶³ Jagose, 62.

identity resisted the notion that sexuality is more of a defining feature of group identification than race or class. Nonetheless, a lesbian's sense of self is supported by her relationship to her lesbian community. In any event, what constitutes a lesbian experience and what shapes an individual's sense of identity will continue to shift in meaning according to time and place.

Lesbian history, inspired by a particular community's desire to voice and define itself, focuses attention on the historical restrictions placed upon differences. Through a reclamation of the past, lesbian historians enrich an otherwise sparse field of research. The objective for these historians, including this study, is to recount the untold histories of lesbians. Building on earlier projects such as Becki Ross's *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (1994), my research profiles a particular lesbian community and details the intricacies and relationships of a principal meeting place. The field of lesbian history has changed over time as historians turn to archival collections, community-based history projects, and oral histories to locate and develop a context for lesbian history.

In telling the history of Womonspace, part of this research project borrows techniques from women's history and gender history. Originating in social history, scholarship in women's history examines the social organization of gender roles, the oppression and marginalization of women, sexuality, and cultural and class issues. Social history entails an exploration of the biographical, community histories, and an examination of social and political movements. Influenced by historians of sexuality, this thesis builds upon an analysis of the discourses of sexuality, the regulation of sexual desire, the social organization of gender and sexuality, heterosexual norms, and a history of lesbian expression in Canada.

In reviewing lesbian history, important links are drawn between the appropriation of social

space and community identity. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, historians Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis trace the development of a lesbian community in Buffalo, New York. Kennedy and Davis demonstrate the connection between social space and the formation of identity and a lesbian consciousness.⁶⁴ Expanding social life strengthens a developing lesbian culture. Gay and lesbian communities emerge by carving out social space in a contentious heterosexual world. My research on Womonspace demonstrates the importance of securing social space to the development of a lesbian community consciousness.

Locating the needs of lesbian women into a social space supports, defines, and helps shape a positive modern lesbian identity as the following quotation suggests:

I know we had a vision, and that was primarily to create a safe place for women to recreate, to learn the skills (at least those that it takes to organize events, and work with each other), to provide a space in which we could grow into our own without the constant nattering, scorn and put downs from men.⁶⁵

In this statement “Joan,” originator of Womonspace, locates social space and safety as primary goals of Edmonton’s lesbian community.

The stories of some members of Womonspace and their perceptions of lesbian culture provides a composite profile of the increase in visibility of that culture. My thesis defines the community as the social, cultural, and political networks available to Edmonton’s gay and lesbian population. Community includes unstructured spaces such as bars, clubs, and house parties. Likewise, community consists of structured spaces, like Womonspace and GATE which operate

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 4.

⁶⁵ Noelle Lucas Personal Collection (hereafter cited as NLPC), Joan [pseudo.], Personal E-Mail to Noelle Lucas, 18 August 1999.

within certain perimeters.

This thesis records the history of Womonspace, a social and recreational organization, and recounts the struggles of a lesbian community to assert a more visible presence from the 1970s to the 1990s. In this instance, Edmonton serves as a case study in which to examine lesbian and lesbian-feminist activity in a mid-sized community. Edmonton's gays and lesbians managed to establish grass-roots organizations, some times having a political role and others having essentially sociocultural meaning. The reason for choosing Womonspace over other such organizations has to do with its unique aim to connect political groups with its own social focus.

Womonspace chose social activities to build community. The organization provides lesbians with the confidence to extend their social and political capabilities elsewhere in the gay and lesbian community. Building community leads to a political outcome— the expansion of social spaces. All the same, Womonspace narrowly defines the political to mean high profile radical feminist activism. My stance on what constitutes political action is more broadly-based. The political concerns a collective's ability to affect social change. The politics of an organization is not necessarily made obvious or public. A tendency to minimize the impact of certain developments indicates a political component. It is my position that Womonspace is political despite its social mandate. Because the fear of "outing" hampers the kind of political participation undertaken, Womonspace depreciates its political role.

My methodological approach combines the use of two types of findings, the contents of *Womonspace News: The Voice of Womonspace to the Edmonton Lesbian Community* and oral interviews. Analysis of relevant details from these sources identifies evident trends and themes borne out of the history of Womonspace. The newsletter linked lesbians to the social possibilities

offered by the organization. This research examines all available issues of *Womonspace News* published from 1982 to 1995.⁶⁶ As well, archival material from the 1970s onward featuring Edmonton's gay and lesbian community are examined for social and political trends. In addition, the contributions of nonprofessional lesbian writers, poets, editorialists, and the recollections of oral interviewees attest to the importance of building community and participating in community-based projects. As a result, this thesis uses both written and oral sources.

Deciphering the contents and major themes of the newsletters is only one approach. The history made by the publication is central to the development of a visible population of lesbians in Western Canada. The contributions of bulletins, newsletters, and various written forms are extremely important to gauge lesbian cultural production. Communications provided by such sources provide essential information concerning the history of lesbian organizing in Canada. Other lesbian discourses from across Canada and the United States reveal both comparable and dissimilar concerns. To say the central issue is one of organizing around a sexual identity is not enough. The lesbian population is as diverse politically, economically, and culturally as any population. Still, a shared sexual preference/orientation is the one identifiable theme upon which most scholars can agree.

The newsletter offers a range of issues, viewpoints, and concerns—some of them unique to *Womonspace* and some of them not. My approach is to go beyond surface information and provide an interpretation of *Womonspace News*. An analysis of the publication draws upon events both inside the organization and within the Edmonton region to provide a thorough examination

⁶⁶ Several issues of *Womonspace News* are housed at the City of Edmonton Public Archives. As well, some back issues are kept at *Womonspace*.

of local lesbian culture therein. The role of the publication is vital to the longevity of the group and the construction of lesbian cultural expression. It relates differences of opinions, conflicts within the organization, and pressing issues of the time. A close examination of the newsletter reveals essential components of lesbian cultural expression and reflects the perplexities of group dynamics.

Further to the newsletter, this study includes organizational files, conference material, and advertisements from Womonspace. The research process also examines written material and oral sources concerning the Gay Alliance Towards Equality (GATE) and Gay and Lesbian Awareness (GALA), both of Edmonton. Generally speaking, GATE is the central organization that spurred other gay and lesbian groups to form in Edmonton.⁶⁷ Edmonton's gay publication *FinePrint* provides some additional information on local concerns. Mainstream newspapers such as the *Edmonton Journal* are used as well to identify clues to the formation of community development.

In addition to archival sources, the thesis incorporates oral histories in the form of taped interviews. Telephone conversations and correspondence through e-mail augment on-site interviews. The recollections of a small group of women attest to the difficulties and frustrations involved in organizing a lesbian meeting place. These women experienced problems stemming from the greater gay male community and from feminist groups who did not take them seriously. Both primary and oral sources indicate the multiple ways Womonspace drew upon social outlets to increase lesbian visibility. A special commendation is offered here for all those who participated in the oral history component of this thesis.

⁶⁷ Most material belonging to Gate is now the property of the City of Edmonton Archives and the Lesbian and Gay Archives of Toronto.

Of necessity, this thesis uses pseudonyms throughout to ensure the privacy of individual participants. Of course, there exists a strong argument for disclosure of subjects willing to have themselves named.⁶⁸ Arguments range from addressing the erasure of lesbian history to the erasure of women's voices and the reclamation of women "hidden from history."⁶⁹ This thesis complies with the University of Saskatchewan's University Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research.⁷⁰ Deciding to opt for aliases was a difficult decision on my part, however, because the history presented here is of a relatively recent nature and some of the material involves recollections that may injure non-participant parties or cause on-going members undue distress, aliases are appropriate. However, two participants, Maureen Irwin and Liz Massiah asked to be identified. As well, Irwin is quoted from material she authored in the form of a partial chronology of lesbian and gay history in Edmonton.

Oral history is one of the more effective means of retrieving and documenting lesbian cultural history. To do this, an interviewer, usually the researcher, listens and records stories from informed or experienced narrators. Narrators relate new and old information so that the history of lesbian experiences and their contexts are referenced. Potential problems arise in terms of whom to contact, getting a good sample (in terms of size and quality) and how to handle the accumulation of information. Nonetheless, this method has potential to expedite timely research where it may not happen otherwise.

⁶⁸ See Appendix III p.141, for sample copy of consent form.

⁶⁹ See Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. ed., *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Nal Books, 1989).

⁷⁰ See Appendix III Pp. 135-140 for Research Protocols.

The process of locating oral participants began with a meeting and an article submitted to *Womonspace News* inviting participants to take part in an oral history project.⁷¹ I met the editor of *Womonspace News* in the Spring of 1999. I explained my interest in *Womonspace* and my wish to tape a group interview. The oral history project was scheduled for Friday night on the 4th of June 1999. Oral sources were members of *Womonspace* and the Edmonton lesbian community from the 1970s to the 1990s. A small but enthusiastic group of women participated and spoke engagingly. From this initial stage, I obtained the names and locations of others that were no longer living in Edmonton. Towards the end of the evening, I had the e-mails and phone numbers of several members. The group interview spurred more interest in the way of correspondence and interviews held at later dates.⁷²

Rather unconventional, but well-suited to the age of electronics, this thesis uses e-mail correspondence as an effective means of information gathering. The information gathered by this method proved highly enlightening. E-mail users wrote forthrightly and honestly of their experiences because their words are carefully chosen. On the one hand, this method allowed participants to control the language and degree of information disclosed. In one sense, subjects gained confidence simply by knowing they have “gone on record” and knowing their words may correct some gap in information. Since the electronic media is such an integral part of this era, it stands to reason that e-mail correspondence is a practical means of recording recollections.

My task, as I see it, is to accept the interpretations of my interview participants as they

⁷¹ See Appendix II, p.130 for “Lesbian History in Edmonton,” submitted to *Womonspace News*, 1 no.1 (June 1999).

⁷² See Appendix II, Pp. 131-134 for an example of the range of interview questions asked of participants.

perceive their identities, experiences, and reflections, rather than controlling the content of the oral histories received. In this way, the interviewees speak for themselves and the memories of participants remain intact. It is also my position to provide an interpretation of those issues, events, and directives linked to Womonspace history. In the final analysis, the relationship between the scholar and her oral sources involves a dynamic interchange necessary for the reconstruction and interpretation of events. Written sources provide content, political directives, and organizational currents. In addition, this type of source illuminates essential historical trends in terms of the relationship between various gay and lesbian organizations in Edmonton, the dynamics between men and women therein, and the role of feminism and gay liberation.

I have chosen to focus on Womonspace because members see themselves as actively building a lesbian community by addressing social avenues rather than political venues. As such, members of the organization in question have a unique role in the shaping of lesbian culture in Edmonton. Once more, researchers may find parallels across Canada by examining the social means utilized by other lesbian groups that may explicitly or inadvertently foster political outcomes. Essentially, Womonspace narrators talked candidly about sexual identity and the need to secure a safe place to foster a lesbian consciousness as well as form attachments with others. It soon became apparent to me that the focus upon community building is essential to the longevity of Womonspace and deserves due consideration here. The crux becomes one of what role community plays in identity formation and how lesbians in this study come to identify themselves with the objectives of the group.

The concern of this thesis is to understand what role Womonspace plays in Edmonton's lesbian community and what this has to say about lesbian culture, "social" activism, and recent

lesbian history. Edmonton is a mid-sized city by Canadian standards and does not have the same degree of openness and visibility of gays and lesbians found in metropolitan cities such as Vancouver, Montreal, or Toronto which makes this study comparatively unique.

Following the above introductory analysis of the role of community upon identity formation and an overview of recent theoretical debates on same-sex desire, come three chapters. Chapter One discusses gay and lesbian organizing beginning in the 1970s at both the national and local level. This section provides the necessary information to situate Womonspace in the overall theme of lesbian history in Canada and outlines the rationale for the founding of a singular lesbian social group in Edmonton, Alberta. Chapter Two presents the oral histories of the participants of this study that chiefly concern Womonspace and the Edmonton lesbian community from the 1970s onwards. Chapter Three illustrates the central role of grass-roots publications to contemporary lesbian organizing in Canada. As well, this chapter examines the content and objectives of the Womonspace newsletter with emphasis upon outreach to the greater Edmonton lesbian community. The conclusion recapitulates the main argument underlining the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE
WOMONSPACE: BUILDING A LESBIAN COMMUNITY
IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA

The intent of this chapter is to situate the goals and directives of Womonspace within the greater Canadian social and political climate of post-gay liberation politics. The birth of an exclusively female social space set apart from gay men positioned lesbian priorities over the competing concerns brought out of mixed organizations. It is important to draw out the major themes upheld by local and national gay and lesbian organizations preceding and following the emergence of Womonspace. Feminist groups held little appeal to non-political lesbians while lesbians who did not want to be identified publically had few choices available to them. By providing a context for the creation of a primary lesbian meeting place, this chapter establishes a basis in which to analyze the successes and failures of the group to meet the needs of Edmonton lesbians. In addition, the historical significance of this period underscores the importance of identity-based politics to the emergence of Womonspace and its ability to sustain itself in terms of community building, diversity, and evolving definitions of lesbianism.

The objective and function of Womonspace are the same: to provide a secure space for women in which to explore their lesbian identity and their relationship to the lesbian community. The main concern of the group is community building. For many lesbians, the common thread linking self to group is shared oppression. In 1981, a small group of women in Edmonton,

Alberta established Womonspace after identifying a need for a safe and positive space where social and recreational needs of lesbians could be met. In the words of member Lynn, "There was no safe place to be with other lesbians and to feel better about yourself and that is the important difference Womonspace made to the community."¹ For lesbians, positive space means having some place to safely "come out." Doing that, usually requires some involvement with lesbian organizations.

In June 1981, a group calling itself Every Woman's Place (EWP) launched a women's centre in Edmonton. The centre opened a year later at 9926 112th Street. Membership soon rose to nearly 150 women. Womonspace first held its meetings here. The women's centre provided a meeting place for various women's groups with an aim to increase awareness of the rights and status of women in the Edmonton area. Womonspace utilized the facilities for its monthly general meetings and for the lesbian drop-ins held every Thursday. The Lesbian Information Line also operated out of the same building. This arrangement lasted until the organization moved into the same facilities as the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre of Edmonton (GLCCE, formerly GATE.)

Womonspace provided a support system to increase self-esteem and self-reliance of women. The compelling vision of the founding group was one of outreach to the entire lesbian community of Edmonton. The essential aim was to foster a positive lesbian identity. The group objectives included social and recreational events, interaction with support organizations, advancement of equality among lesbians and gays, a forum for discussion of issues relevant to

¹Noelle Lucas Private Collection, (NLPC), Lynn [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

lesbians, increased awareness of Womonspace and its activities, and other similar support for lesbians.²

In the meantime, the general meeting continued to be scheduled for every second Tuesday of the month at EWP on 112th Street. Incidentally, members Joan and Ann previously performed counselling duties at GATE and heard time and again from lesbians in the community that there was nothing to do socially in the city. Joan became Womonspace's first president following that first meeting in January 1982. Ann served on the board as secretary. She provided the music for the dances and together the two of them co-ordinated the dances for the first year of the organization.

Like other non-profit organizations, Womonspace consisted of a board of directors, a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer, a membership director, a public relations director, a newsletter director, an editor, and a volunteer co-ordinator. Volunteers were necessary to the overall success of Womonspace activities. Womonspace policy requested members to give at least three hours of volunteer work annually to keep the admission fees to the dances low. Tasks such as setting up tables, selling tickets, bartending, preparing food, and putting the newsletter together are non-paid activities members performed. Debbie recalls the important difference volunteering made for her:

One of the ways that I did come out (besides realizing I'm not heterosexual) was to take responsibility for my body so I decided to take a women's defense class. Of course, the two women who were running it were lesbians. The other way was to get involved in Womonspace—in the kitchen. There was no way I could go and dance but I could help out in the kitchen and later sit at one of the tables. I wouldn't talk with you but I made a deal with myself to stick it out an hour before leaving. Later, I'd end up staying for two

² Womonspace Web page, <http://www.gaycanada.com/womonspace/wshome.htm>
Created November, 1997, accessed January, 1999.

and the next time three you'd work your way in and it was very much like that.³

Meeting the social needs of lesbians requires an assortment of activities intended to create social bonds. An editorial provided by *Womonspace News* states, "Making contact with other lesbians whether it be social, political, or cultural is similar to finding a long lost relative or returning to a childhood playground."⁴ Meeting regularly with others and sharing coming out stories, attending dances, workshops or drop-ins strengthen a lesbian's sense of identity and creates a sense of belonging with others. Hence, Womonspace incorporates the word "space" as part of its namesake. "Space" suggests locating the needs of lesbians into a central organization to share their diversity with others. Lesbian historian Line Chamberland, for instance, argues that "to exist socially, to create its own culture, an oppressed group must occupy social space within which a collective can grow."⁵

The founding sisters understood the importance of procuring a social space in which to explore and share their commitment to women in a supportive environment. In an interview for *FinePrint*, one member of the organization offers her views on the origin of the name "Womonspace." She states:

A couple of [members] were tossing around some thoughts. I think it really had a name before we decided what it was going to be. I had run into a paper at Common Woman Books called Women Spirit and I had that in mind when we were thinking of a name. One of the things that was foremost in our minds was that there has to be space in this city for

³NLPC, Debbie, [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁴"Editorial," *Womonspace News* 2, no.4 (April 1984): 2.

⁵Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-1975," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*. ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 402.

lesbians. . . . We [Womonspace founders] couldn't go on being anonymous and oblivious. Then we started thinking actively about obtaining our physical space for our organization. So it just came together, naturally.⁶

Similarly, in 1984 Agathe Gaulin, former President of Womonspace, presented her thoughts on the subject:

Womonspace . . . whatever possessed our founding sisters to call Edmonton's own lesbian organization 'Womonspace'? Are there not words in our vocabulary to describe a place where womyn may gather to share ideas and feel good doing a variety of silly and serious things? One must deduce that after intensive research in English, Latin, Greek and Lesbos dictionaries, no such word was found. In a way, it is not at all surprising that no existing words could hold up the weight of some one hundred womyn bent on improving the world for their sister lesbians. . . . The time has come, however, for this attitude to change. Every woman has within her the capabilities to do great deeds and Womonspace wants to supply the needed "space" and support.⁷

Feminist jargon of the time "womyn and womon" disassociated the term "woman" from that of "man" in a conscious act of resistance to patriarchy.⁸ Phonetic changes strengthened lesbian pride and demonstrated an emotional commitment to women in general.

Womonspace evolved to integrate a dispersed lesbian population in order to enhance the visibility of Edmonton lesbians. It is not possible to determine the number of lesbians living in the Edmonton area, but as member Coreen explains:

There are a lot of women living out in the suburbs quietly with their lover We [members] rarely see them. I think, like any other group, it is a total cross-section. I think the group that is visible tends to be the younger group. The older women, in general, are probably more settled in their lives and don't tend to go to discos.⁹

⁶ Brian Chittock, "Fine Conversation," *FinePrint* 1, no.3 (1983): 7.

⁷ Agathe Gaulin, *Womonspace News* 2, no.9 (September 1984): 2.

⁸ The use of "womyn" "womon" as opposed to women are commonly used throughout the newsletter.

⁹ "Edmonton Called Unresponsive to Lesbians," *Edmonton Journal*, 25 May 1983.

The focus on outreach to a cross-section of women includes the number of rural women who find out about Womonspace through the newsletter and by word of mouth. Rural lesbian Catherine explains:

My partner and I were just hanging around and living together. For about six years and we never really saw a lot of lesbians, only two or three. And, I am one of those that came from the rural area. It just got to the point where we were so isolated that we had to move out and identify with others. I guess that I would have to say that I was very intimidated at first . . . but I found that Womonspace offered a certain space for us. It was very important to us to have a woman-only space. [It] was very comforting. Once a month we'd meet with the coffee group.¹⁰

To what extent a person identifies with any one group varies from individual to individual. In any case, Womonspace offered an alternative to both clubs and mixed groups in the Edmonton area.

Joan explains:

The development of a women's group was imminent. It was bound to happen. You can't have a group of people as large as we without something coming out of it and it wasn't going to come out of the established groups None of us [members] were strong enough to fight within those groups.¹¹

The emergence of a collective extended the social space made available to Edmonton lesbians.

The use of a physical space provided members with support and an opportunity to make connections with other lesbians.

Often lesbians are divided along lines of age, race, ethnicity, class and political persuasions. Social historian Becki Ross writes:

Lesbian community, or, more accurately, communities, tend to revolve around small friendship groups, some of which self-identify loosely as anarchist, socialist, gay liberationists, environmentalists, anti-racist, separatist, or radical, while others, such as the

¹⁰ NLPC, Catherine, [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

¹¹ Chittock, 7.

bar community, have no overt political affiliation.¹²

Community is an imprecise concept but offers individuals a common ground in which to explore self-hood and what it is to be a lesbian alongside other lesbians. To avoid generalizations, any exploration of community needs to consider the relatedness and diversity of many women's lives with aspects of social, cultural and political activity.

To arrive at a sense of identity is to locate one's position in the world. For some, identity is about "claiming" space in a world that continually changes with the times.¹³ For Womonspace, claiming space is about creating space and linking spatial needs to lesbians. The search for self and the search for belonging to a community create a cultural connection. Since all aspects of social activity bear changes in response to new information, identity formation is introspective. Certainly, questions concerning identity are by no means limited to the experience of lesbians. Having experienced oppression on account of sexual orientation as well as gender, lesbians are highly aware of societal erasure of their existence.¹⁴

Without a doubt, gay and lesbian organizing took off during the 1970s.¹⁵ Up until that time, only a few scattered gay and lesbian networks existed across Canada. The growing number

¹² Becki L. Ross, *The House that Jill Build: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto University Press, 1995), 11.

¹³ Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 4.

¹⁴ Stein, 5.

¹⁵ Barry D. Adams, "Winning Rights and Freedoms in Canada," in *The Third Pink Book: A Global View of Lesbian and Gay Liberation and Oppression* ed. Art Hendriks, Rob Tielman and Evert Vander Veen (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), 26.

of student movements, anti-war movements, and civil rights groups active in the 1960s led to the first gay discussion groups and homophile organizations. As social historian Gary Kinsman writes, “the homophile groups of the 1950s and early 1960s were generally identified with a reliance on medical, psychiatric, and sexological experts to educate the public and legitimize homosexuality.”¹⁶ A small number of homophile organizations were established in the 1950s with a view to educate the public that gay men and lesbians as citizens had similar values to the rest of society.¹⁷ Unlike gay liberationist groups, homophile organizations did not proclaim a distinct gay or lesbian identity nor did they develop a politics of sexuality. This trend subsided with the advent of the New Left and the politics of liberation. As political science professor Miriam Smith argues:

The new social movements, notably the women’s movement, questioned the liberal dichotomy between public and private spheres, arguing that the personal is political. The liberal separation of the public and private meant that certain issues such as sexuality were privatized, rendered apolitical, and cast as immutable.¹⁸

Lesbians and gays challenged the supremacy of the state at both federal and provincial levels to disadvantage certain groups on the basis of sexual orientation.

In Canada, most gay and lesbian groups did not form until after 1969, following the Stonewall riots. The well-documented events that led up to the riots contributed to an acceleration of gay and lesbian liberation movements across North America. On the night of 27 June 1969, riot police entered the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich

¹⁶ Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996), 230.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 2.

¹⁸ Miriam Smith, *Lesbian and Gay Rights In Canada: Social Movements and Equality-Seeking, 1971-1995* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 6.

Village, New York. Enraged by countless raids, gays and lesbians fought back. Events of that night spawned "Gay Power" which did much to unify gay activists.¹⁹ Moreover, gay pride asserted a new meaning to the politics of identity, a marked contrast to earlier homophile groups.²⁰ Within a year, gay liberation groups spread across the United States marking the end of the homophile chapter.

Gay organizing in Canada first formed around large urban populations. In 1970, Vancouver formed the first gay liberation group, called the Vancouver Gay Liberation Front. Montreal followed suit with the Front de Libération Homosexuelle (FLH) while Toronto formed the Toronto Gay Action organization. Similar, albeit lesser known groups formed in Western Canada. For instance, the Gay Alliance for Equality, Edmonton (GATE) organized in 1972. And, in 1973, the Gay Community Centre of Saskatoon opened its doors. Other groups branched forth in smaller communities like Red Deer and Lethbridge, Alberta. Such community efforts offered gays and lesbians educational resources, self-help, counselling, meeting places as well as a forum for social and political directives.

Lesbians on the prairies had one of three choices: either join a mixed gay organization, participate in one of the many women's organizations available to them, or continue to socialize in bars and clubs. Prairie lesbians could join such gay organizations as Winnipeg's Happenings Social Club or Mutual Friendship Society, Saskatoon's the Zodiac Friendship Society, or

¹⁹ John D'Emilo, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 228.

²⁰ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 32.

Edmonton's Club 70.²¹ This latter group features prominently in the ensuing discussion. Some lesbians had the added advantage of attending support groups, utilizing information lines, or participating in the few lesbian collectives available to them. Most of these groups provided a supportive space for social activities, drop-ins, and/or lesbian-feminist discussion groups apart from the sexist attitudes found in some mixed organizations.

Even so, many lesbians experienced degrees of sexism from both the gay male and straight male population. Therefore, it makes sense that a group of women wanted to meet in an uniquely lesbian space. According to Womonspace member Joan:

Most of us [members of Womonspace] had been involved with other groups in the city (Dignity, GATE). The general feeling has been that we were not very welcome. One of the things that we found over and over again in the meetings and discussions [with GATE] was that if we had something to say, it was either ignored, interrupted or we were being patronized. It was a very condescending attitude. How does one ever accomplish anything in an atmosphere like that? It was not at all conducive to having people talk and be involved. Much of the work we did was the labour. If we had any ideas, they were taken by someone else and [we] always ended up being the workers and not the organizers. It just comes down to the basic kinds of attitudes in society. Women are not worth anything. If they talk it's not important. We are not thought of having capabilities and strengths, or authority or understanding of our lives, or anything else. Most of the women felt very condescended to in the clubs as well.²²

However, despite any difficulties and tensions experienced, founding members did not wish to organize as lesbian-separatists, a process leading to a separatist identity. The term "lesbian-separatists" presupposes a radical lesbian-feminist theory. The women of Womonspace held no such agenda. *Womonspace News* outlined the goal of Womonspace:

²¹ For a detailed account of lesbian organizations and periodicals, see Alan V. Miller's "Lesbian Periodical Holdings in the Canadian Gay Archives as of June, 1981" *Canadian Gay Archives Publication* 4.

²² Chittock, 7.

In creating an all-women group, with activities that are exclusive to women, we [the members of Womonspace] do not advocate separatism, but rather independence, mutual support and strength in numbers. Our purpose is not to split the gay community but rather to strengthen our half of it so that both the male and female parts will become equal in our path toward freedom and understanding.²³

Although the gay and lesbian communities of the 1970s advocated the integration of men and women for the solidarity of the movement, in some cases, lesbians found established gay rights groups repressive of women's interests. Certainly, many lesbian-feminists found the degree of sexism in politicized gay liberation movements unacceptable.

In Winnipeg, a conference, which predated the formation of the Canadian Lesbian Gay Rights Coalition (CLGRC), adopted a resolution to end sexism in the mostly gay-male organizations. To foster better relations between men and women, the resolution recommended the introduction of literature and discussions on feminist issues in order to combat sexism. The Coalition stated:

Gay Liberation recognizes and adopts as its own principle of the women's movement as a whole that men don't have a place in determining the overall priorities of women. This is an issue because of the double oppression of gay women. It follows that the actions of gay women to set up organizations and collectives limited in participation to women cannot be considered as anti-male or sexist. Gay Liberation rejects per se the notion that sexism in the gay movement is a "two-way street" because it suggests that women have possessed power equal to men and that women have the ability to oppress men in a social, economic and political sense.²⁴

CLGRC members took measures to rectify the balance of internal power because of deeply entrenched sexism in the organization.

For example, a conference held in 1974 explored sexism in the gay movement to seek

²³ "Food for Thought," *Womonspace News* 1, no.9 (September, 1983): 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

solutions to a growing problem.²⁵ Conversely, the 7th annual conference of the CLGRC restated its commitment to lesbian involvement since some members felt the Coalition went out of its way to prevent women from participating. In the form of a resolution, chairperson Michael Arkin wrote:

Whereas there is also a belief that the men who presently control the Coalition are so entrenched and smugly complacent in their sexism that they could never loosen their grip on the reins of power, and . . . Whereas the CLGRC would like to combat these attitudes in an attempt to allow women a vehicle whereby they could, if they so desired, actually control the Coalition, determine its course, programs, priorities, etc., Therefore BE IT Resolved that at the next CLGRC convention, delegates from groups within the Coalition that have women members will have to be women delegates.²⁶

Throughout the 1970s, the issue of sexism and lesbian participation in the gay movement persisted.

Four years later, solidarity was again the theme for the 6th Annual Conference for Lesbians and Gay Men held in Halifax.²⁷ While the CLGRC issued its support of actions taken by the women's movement, the coalition concentrated heavily on issues directly concerning gay men. These issues included a demand for criminal code reforms of laws regarding age of consent, vagrancy, and buggery.²⁸ The fight against repression centred on proposals to unite the gay

²⁵ Glenbow Museum Archives, (GMA), Box A96-97, "Letter to Bob Wallace of Gays for Equality from Don Husbach of GATE," Second Annual Gay Rights Conference (August 13, 1974).

²⁶ GMA, Location M8397 in the Doug Young File, File #12, Michael Arkin, "Dialogue," Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition (1974-1979).

²⁷ GMA, Location M8397 in the Doug Young File, File # 12, "6th Annual Conference: structure and repression dominate discussions," in *Forum: News-And-News Bulletin of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition* (Summer, 1978).

²⁸ GMA, Michael Arkin, "Dialogue."

movement over its opposition to the Anita Bryant campaign. Bryant, a one-time Miss America, promoted Florida orange juice.²⁹ Dubbed the “Save the Children” Campaign and subsidized by fundamentalist Christian anti-homosexual forces in the United States, Anita Bryant took her campaign across most major Canadian cities.³⁰ Bryant’s homophobic crusade incited considerable opposition from gays and lesbians across Canada.

Gays and lesbians at the 1975 Ottawa conference formed the National Gay Rights Coalition (NGRC). In this instance, the issue of lesbian participation resulted in the formation of the Women’s Caucus. The purpose of the caucus was to recruit lesbian participation in the NGRC from pre-existing groups. Yet, the Toronto conference held a year later in 1976 defeated the motion to take women’s issues as its own. However, the NGRC recognized the formation of an autonomous “national lesbian movement.”³¹ The NGRC did not support giving precedence of such feminist concerns as abortion, child care, equal pay and so on, over general issues of gay and lesbian oppression.

The NGRC held its 1977 conference in Saskatoon and the issue was equality. Lesbians constituted 50% of the Coalition participants. On this occasion, Wages Due Lesbians held a workshop on the issue of wages for housework, a campaign adopted by a number of women’s organizations at the time. As it was, the conference passed a resolution supporting custody rights for lesbian mothers. Other resolutions dealt with the denunciation of the Anita Bryant campaign, and support for John Damien over the issue of job security. The Ontario Racing Commission fired

²⁹ Ross, 157.

³⁰ Ibid., 158.

³¹ Ibid.

Damien, a jockey and racing steward, on account of his sexual orientation. Sexism of NGRC triggered the formation of a lesbian autonomy workshop and the call for a lesbian caucus.³²

Writer Wiesia Kolasinska calls the Prairie Gay Conference a tremendous success since lesbians were guaranteed at least half of the decision-making power. According to Kolasinska, "Much was accomplished and a feeling of strength and solidarity was generated. Women and men together laid the foundations for a strong prairie movement."³³ Much of this conference addressed the isolation facing rural gays and lesbians and how to provide services for outlying regions. In any event, the conference organized primarily to discuss regional concerns and compared to national conferences was more of a joint effort between men and women. Prairie men and women, however, did struggle over built-in sexism. Indeed, the next conference held in Calgary showed that the differences remained unresolved.

In one case, an anonymous female writer accused the Calgary coalition of not being at all "interested in lesbians or the issues concerning gay women" The same writer harshly derided male members in this way: "I'm expected to march in support of your [gay men's] right to romp in public toilets, but my right to walk safely at night is overlooked."³⁴ Interestingly enough, several conferences held throughout the 1970s focused virtually on lesbian participation alone.³⁵ These are just some of the important issues and debates raised by lesbians within the gay and

³² Pat MacMillan, "National Gay Rights Conference," *Prairie Woman* 1, no.2 (August, 1977): 6.

³³ Wiesia Kolasinska, "Prairie Gay Conference," *Prairie Woman* 1, no.2 (August, 1977): 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ GMA, Location M8397 in the Doug Young File, File #12, Allan Harkin, "Dialogue," Canadian Lesbian Gay Rights Coalition (1974-1979).

lesbian rights movement that led to the politicizing of lesbian groups in general.

In 1979 Toronto held the National Lesbian Conference with over 400 women from across Canada. Attendance included ten representatives from Saskatoon. The objective of the meeting was to establish a binational lesbian movement with a social and political base. Workshops covered topics from lesbian mothers to lesbian culture and politics. At one point members proposed a lesbian bill of rights for job security, custody rights, child care, and non-sexist education.³⁶ As a result, conference participants took the proposal back to their representative groups to promote discussion of subsequent rights.

Even so, the equality measures taken by central organizations did not satisfy all female participants of the CLGRC and NGRC. Because of charges of built-in sexism within gay organizations, some lesbians sought answers on their own or looked to feminist organizing. Others continued to work alongside gay men to spearhead lesbian and gay rights into the public forum. Lesbian organizations raised important issues on behalf of themselves and all women. Though gay liberation groups critiqued dominant sex and gender roles, the masculine relation to sexuality was set apart from the feminine. Thus, some lesbians began to challenge sexism in gay liberation circles and formed autonomous groups.

On the local scene, lesbian communities in Edmonton devised unique ways of dealing with challenges in both the gay community and "straight" society. The *Edmonton Journal* reported on a new "gay" self-realization course planned by women. The 10 March 1972 issue described a "gay women's liberation as opposed to gay women who wish to create an isolated lesbian

³⁶ "Binational Lesbian Conference," *Prairie Woman* 3, no.1 (August/September, 1979): 12.

community.”³⁷ Four women, Jeanne, a lesbian mother and her partner Maureen, Darlene and her unnamed partner, between twenty and thirty years old, prepared a course to fight sexism in the community. The five-week program explored antiquated myths about female sexuality and lesbianism that continued to circulate. Darlene explained that after she realized she was gay:

I found I wanted to be near this female. I enjoyed her companionship, the easy communication between us and the whole thing of being in love. I found myself dropping my male friends and this was long before any sensual aspect to the relationship. But in this society once you say you’re lesbian you cease to exist in people’s minds as a person who works, thinks and simply enjoys life. You become a purely sexual being, [because] society is so hung up on the physical connotations of homosexuality.³⁸

The commentary provided with the *Edmonton Journal* news item added, “ [The four women interviewed] are also bitter and angry and hate the male world and the male supremacist society they live in.” The unmistakable language of lesbian-separatism cast the poignant feelings expressed by the women.

The central organization for Edmonton’s gays and lesbians was the GATE chapter formed by a group of left-wing radical university students as a lobbying group to change laws discriminating against homosexuals. Its office, located on 109th Street, offered a number of services including an evening call-in line to gay Albertans. The position paper of GATE called for “a world free of guilt and fear, where people can freely decide what sexual life they want.”³⁹

GATE worked to change attitudes gays and lesbians had towards themselves caused by internal and external homophobia. The organization primarily performed an educational role, making

³⁷“Women Plan Course in ‘gay’ Self-Realization,” *Edmonton Journal*, 10 March 1972.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹Jim Bentein, “Gays Quit the Shadows, Seek Place in the Sun,” *Edmonton Journal*, 9 May 1975.

information available to the community and the public at large. GATE regularly sent public speakers to schools and groups to speak about homosexuality. Committees in the organization attacked the legal system to eradicate laws discriminating against gays and lesbians.

However, the group's most fundamental purpose was to provide counselling services to same-sex persons. According to Don, a member of GATE, "We [the members] want to help gay people deal with problems they have in accepting themselves We feel we can provide the kind of empathy gay people need."⁴⁰ Both male and female counselors operated the phone lines.

According to Edmonton activist Maureen Irwin:

There seems to have been a split between the strong rights activist and those who saw GATE as more of a social agency providing drop-in centre and counselling. The activist formed a branch of Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Association (CLGRA) to concentrate on demonstrations & activism. GATE under Don Meen and others voted to have no political affiliation. Emphasis was on social services to the community. . . . strong emphasis was placed on professional training for peer counselling staff and telephone staff. GATE saw their [sic] role as education and social services. Coffee houses, camping events, picnics, and other social events were held regularly.⁴¹

Ironically, GATE, like Womonspace after it, voted against political affiliation and yet performed both political and social roles.⁴² How an organization goes about defining its focus in terms of the political role is quite revealing. The sense here is that image played a large role in the organization. To ingratiate itself to the conservative climate of Edmonton, groups like GATE and Womonspace chose to downplay the political potency of such efforts.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ City of Edmonton Public Archives, Maureen Irwin, "A Partial Chronology of the Edmonton Lesbian/Gay History," (1996) File unsorted by #

⁴² In spite of the vote for no political affiliation, GATE routinely advertised itself as a forum for civil rights.

Jim Bentein of the *Edmonton Journal* described a meeting he had with a group of GATE members. The discussion focused upon the stigma of being homosexual. The Edmonton context commonly repressed and isolated gays and lesbians. Tired of living on the fringe of society, people come down to GATE to meet each other to get away from the “straight world.” As one lesbian put it, “‘Coming out’, admitting to being homosexual, forces many gays to abandon heterosexual lifestyle they may have emulated.”⁴³ A grade 12 student exclaimed: “It’s so oppressive there [in Edmonton]. Everything so blatantly heterosexual and hostile. It’s all ‘You homo this and you homo that.’”⁴⁴ Members of GATE listed discriminations against homosexuals in Canada including the legal right to marry, filing joint income tax returns, pension rights, and public housing.

The consensus was that, if you were gay or lesbian, then Edmonton was no place to be, nor Canada for that matter. In Alberta, the provincial Bill of Rights and the Individual Rights Protection Act (IRPA) failed to ensure the rights of homosexuals. Beginning in 1973, GATE petitioned the government to change the IRPA. Two years later, GATE sent a questionnaire to 200 provincial candidates asking their position on sexual orientation. The straight press refused to print the results.⁴⁵ The Province of Alberta has yet to amend legislation to include sexual orientation on the list of those groups protected from discrimination.

Moreover, in 1978 a break-in took place at GATE leaving several hundred dollars worth of damage. Nonetheless, member Bob Radke suggested violence against homosexuals was

⁴³ Jim Bentein, “Get it Straight: We Don’t Want to Change,” *Edmonton Journal*, 9 May 1975.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ NLPC, Lynn, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

relatively rare in Edmonton.⁴⁶ However, discrimination was nothing new and most members feared having their names publicized because of possible repercussions at work and at home. "Coming out" during the 1970s remained a difficult decision for most Edmonton homosexuals. Clearly, safety and anonymity constituted genuine concerns for women who chose to join Womonspace.

Many lesbians found the predominantly gay male organizations sexist and formed either lesbian caucuses or short-lived lesbian feminists groups. For example, in 1972 a number of lesbians in Ontario broke away from the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT). Calling themselves the CUNTS, they cited sexism as the predominant problem.⁴⁷ "Until the gays of CHAT see the necessity of struggling against sexism . . . our [lesbian members of CHAT] energies will not be wasted on raising the consciousness of members of CHAT who should be raising their own."⁴⁸ The position taken by this group is not unique. A number of years later the founders of Womonspace cited sexism as one of the more prominent reasons for organizing a group in Edmonton.

When asked about the suppression of women in the gay community as opposed to the straight community, Joan [of Womonspace] offered the following:

Because gay men really don't have to deal with women . . . there's no driving force for men to be around women in the gay community or vice versa. I think eventually, we [lesbians] are all going to realize that we would all be better off if we did spend some time with each other. But there's going to have to be a lot more understanding on both sides

⁴⁶ Jim Davis, "Discrimination Everyday Thing for City's Gays," *Edmonton Journal*, 13 March 1978.

⁴⁷ The acronym for the group called the CUNTS is not defined.

⁴⁸ Becki Ross, 35.

before we can achieve that. When we first started off we were definitely a threat. Why were we starting up? Why are we breaking up the gay community? Some of the organizations are trying very hard not to be sexist. But they've got a long way to go.⁴⁹ The founders of Womonspace felt they needed a separate group but hoped some kind of

understanding could be reached with other organizations in the Edmonton gay community.

In any case, though some resolutely lesbian separatist groups formed across Canada, the majority were short-lived and loosely organized. The best known of these was the Lesbian Organization of Toronto (LOOT), an organization that developed a distinctive politics of lesbian identity formation.⁵⁰

Similarly, an Edmonton woman expressed her radical lesbian feminist views in a single 1972 edition of Edmonton's *On Our Way*. She wrote:

I grew up a male oriented woman. I liked men. They were sure and smart and strong. They had cars and money. They were the ticket to music, travel, and excitement. I knew how to be with men. I knew exactly what was expected. I performed my tasks as "woman" adequately. Three years ago this spring I got tired of it. Just plain sick and tired. I had been into Women's Liberation for some months and had pushed and shoved myself in my relationship with a man. It wasn't possible. . . . I left with the support of women. Gradually over a period of months, I found that I enjoyed the company of women much more than that of men. Men began to bore me. The sex habit was hard to break down. My sexuality with men had been an important part of my identity. I had either to deny the part of me that wanted to screw or play ugly little games that were a prelude to it. I decided that wasn't worth it. Men were simply eliminated from my life. I and the women I lived with were aware that political contact with men was debilitating and distracting and personal contact was irrelevant. And we hated them for what they did to the good women we knew.⁵¹

The writer described a gradual process that led her to choose separatism and women as preferred

⁴⁹ Chittock, 7-8.

⁵⁰ Becki L. Ross, "How Lavender Jane Loved Women: Re-figuring Identity-based Life/Stylism in 1970s Lesbian Feminism," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 30, no.4 (Winter 1995-96): 110-128.

⁵¹ Author unknown, "Making Space," *On Our Way* (1972): 3.

sexual partners. In the context of women's liberation, she saw her lesbian identity as a political choice. A number of women concerned with sexism and the oppression of all women chose to adopt a lesbian-feminist theory.

Even so, lesbians found themselves oppressed by some women who equated feminism with lesbianism. Lesbians within the women's movement were routinely placed on the defensive.

Trish argued:

We [lesbians in the women's movement] cannot work with straight sisters unless some things are understood. We have to be there to make them . . . understand because they are too afraid of us to do it alone. Some straight women will come out because we have created the space for them to do that: some sisters in Edmonton have come out recently. It would have been much more difficult if not impossible for them without the support of sisters shouting: its fine to be a lesbian, fine for ourselves and our movement. . . . We demand from straight women in the movement that they recognize our love and our oppression— not only legal and job hassles but the ways that they— you, the straight women who will read this—have oppressed us.⁵²

The battle against lesbian oppression in the women's movement led some women-identified-women to choose separatism as in the case of LOOT. Others like Trish chose to wage their struggles within feminist organizations.

Edmonton Lesbian Feminists (ELF) along with the Edmonton's Women's Centre composed the newsletter issue entitled *On Our Way*. In 1972, they held their meetings at the women's centre located on 95th Street. According to the members of this feminist group (eighteen in all, including six lesbians), ELF "shared an image of a free space where women who were interested in Women's Liberation could get together. [They] also shared the idea that there had to be room for lesbians in this Women's Centre."⁵³ The number of lesbians was disproportionate to

⁵² Ibid., 6.

⁵³ Ibid.

the number of straight feminists. Yet, the ELF lesbians felt they were doing the greater share of the political work and saw their straight sisters as “selling themselves out” to men: “We can’t pull straight women’s liberation people together. Nor can we orient ourselves to the needs of straight women. We shouldn’t have to,” ELF member Trish explained.⁵⁴ Though a lesbian drop-in continued to be held at the centre, ELF members tired of political infighting dissolved the group shortly thereafter.

During this same period, an attempt to establish a lesbian co-op house called Cybelline House occurred. “Joan,” one of the participants of this study, and a group of friends planned on renting a house for women only. The women did not permit men to read the electric meter. She recalls a nineteen year old male university student looking at the house with interest. When he found out that Joan was a lesbian, he informed her he would be the one to convert her to the straight life. Another individual male commented on the “good vibes” in the house. When Joan informed him that the house was just for lesbians, the young man retorted, “I knew there was something funny about the atmosphere in the house.”⁵⁵ Unfortunately, because of financial constraints, the project fell through in the spring of 1972.

In May 1977, the Prairie Socialist Feminist Conference held in Regina grappled with lesbianism in the women’s movement. That year a speaker, Charlotte Rochon, suggested that straight women have to come to terms with lesbians in the movement and understand that lesbianism is a feminist issue: “Because lesbians have actively chosen to, and must struggle against social pressure of homophobia many have gained the strength and wisdom that the women’s

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Irwin, 2.

movement needs in order to understand, develop, and control our own herstory.”⁵⁶ The oppression of lesbians in the women’s movement negated the oppression of all women regardless of orientation. From all accounts, lesbians on the prairies, as elsewhere, navigated a fine line in both feminist and gay liberation groups. Bars, on the other hand, continued to serve the primary social needs of lesbians in the community.

A lesbian named Terri, a member of Club 70, offered “a plea to all my sisters who still hover in the shadows to come out amongst our own” and join her at the club. She remembered the fear of discovery she once felt:

Fear seems to rule our [lesbians] lives, a fear that is real and compelling and that cannot but curb our efforts or inclinations to BE, let alone be ourselves. I know for I was a member of that terrified group a few years ago, and now I wonder what I was afraid of. Though I lived with another lesbian, we were very careful to appear as roommates in public: we dared NOT use endearing words, touch each other, sit in any but a ladylike fashion (whatever that is), wear slacks or associate publicly with other known lesbians (birds of a feather . . . you know!). If we read an occasional book about gays, the book was destroyed immediately after we’d read it lest “someone” find it and suspect our natural beat. Worse still we never, but never uttered the word lesbian and we shunned any conversation regarding gays for it made us feel too self-conscious, uncomfortable . . . and of course would have revealed our awesome secret . . . and what would they have thought if “they” knew? In desperate fear we lived in a twilight world of our own making somewhere between the dull heterosexual way of life and the gayer style of other lesbians who were proud to be just that. Yet, we longed to meet other gays and to socialize with our own people hidden somewhere in our city. Where to safely meet other gays? How to approach them? Ah! That was the puzzler.⁵⁷

Luckily for Terri, she found what she was looking for at Club 70, which began as a non-profit society in the basement of a Greek restaurant on 101 Street and 106th Avenue. For Terri, Club 70 increased her social contacts with other lesbians.

⁵⁶ Author unknown, “Hello and Welcome Back,” *Prairie Woman* 1, no.2 (August, 1977): 1.

⁵⁷ City of Edmonton Public Archives, “Lesbian Lore,” March, 1972 File unsorted.

According to Cal, a board member, police used a variety of scare tactics to frequently raid the club. Since regulations restricted the club to one liquor license per month, patrons smuggled in bottles of liquor. Shortly after opening, the owner closed the club down.⁵⁸ The society took the owner to court and on court order he paid the cost of relocating to 106 street. Prior to Club 70, gay men and lesbians found a variety of ways to meet each other. According to a partial chronology put together by Maureen Irwin:

Gay men and lesbians have always found ways to meet even in Edmonton. . . . long before there were clubs there were the drinking places; the queens frequented the bars in Mayfair Hotel. Gay and lesbian university crowd went to the Corona. King Edward Hotel and Royal George Hotel were patronized by gay men and lesbians. . . . People used to go there and then find out where the party was that week-end.⁵⁹

In spite of the turbulent nature of the bars, some lesbians continued to socialize at Club 70.

To illustrate, a woman known as “JD” felt safe at Club 70 and described a “wonderful mixed atmosphere.”⁶⁰ Though Joan found the fights that broke out unsettling, the bars nonetheless provided a home of sorts.⁶¹ According to Cal “gay men and lesbians had special relationships, valuable friendships like you don’t see any more, there was a special comradeship.”⁶² He described a lot of mixed private parties and house parties prior to organized feminists groups. The politics of women’s liberation complicated the “special relationships” between gay men and lesbians.

⁵⁸Maureen Irwin, *A Partial Chronology* 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁶¹ NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 18 August 1999.

⁶² Maureen Irwin, *A Partial Chronology* 1-2.

Club 70 closed down in 1978 because of financial problems and reopened as the Cha Cha Place. The Cha Cha was a short-lived non-profit society that lasted less than a year because of violence and damage blamed for the most part on lesbians.⁶³ Coincidentally, a year later the same building re-opened as Boots, a private men's club. Women attended Boots by invitation only. Fortunately, Flashback opened in 1976 on Jasper Ave (later moving to 103 Avenue and 104th Street), with one night a week set aside for women. Similarly, the Roost opened a year later as a men's club; after about one year, the management opened its doors to women to draw more business.

Nonetheless, for many lesbians the clubs proved to be troublesome. Several members of Womonspace recount violent episodes and harassment by "swingers" coming in. Typically, swingers consisted of straight men or couples seeking a third party for a sexual encounter. Two lesbians from Womonspace had this to report, "Being a lesbian in Edmonton is not easy . . . one of the city's three gay bars even refuses to let women in."⁶⁴ One woman described Edmonton as a city of "red necks."⁶⁵ Others like Terri found ways of adapting and socializing with women who frequented the club scene. She describes inhabiting a "shadowy" twilight world where fear of identification led to isolation and complex ways of safeguarding the privacy of same-sex relationships.⁶⁶ Many politically conscious lesbians turned to radical feminist groups to challenge sexism and institutionalized homophobia.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Edmonton Called Unresponsive to Lesbians," *Edmonton Journal*, 25 May 1983.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

In 1974, during the first meeting of the British Columbia Federation of Women, Pat Smith raised the issue of lesbianism and homophobia in the women's movement. Smith challenged the federation by asking why a lesbian policy was not in place. As a consequence, a lesbian caucus formed. As historian Nancy Adamson points out:

Initially many lesbians felt the need to organize autonomously as lesbians, regardless of larger individual political analyses, for many of the same reasons women first came together in CR [conscious raising] groups; the need for support and a safe place for self-definition, to explore the existence of lesbian feminist politic and to understand feelings of discomfort within the women's movement. However, after this early period women discovered that being a lesbian in itself was not necessarily a sufficient basis for organizing. . . . The struggle was, and remains, to insist that the women's movement take up the issues of lesbianism and heterosexism.⁶⁷

A great majority of lesbians, such as ELF members, preferred to work with existing feminists groups or form lesbian caucuses like the Lesbian Caucus of British Columbia Federation of Women. In Saskatchewan, the Saskatoon Women's Liberation chapter gave some consideration to lesbian concerns. For instance, the newsletter *Prairie Woman* offers a detailed account of the National Lesbian Conference held in Toronto in 1979 and lists a number of topics concerning legal rights, and lesbian oppression, and addresses the need for an autonomous lesbian movement in Canada.⁶⁸ But women's groups proved a contested terrain for lesbians. Feminist organizations denied lesbian participation with their reluctance to acknowledge lesbians in their midst.

Before Womonspace existed, the lesbian community in Edmonton was rather imperceptible and anonymous. In "There is Strength (and Safety) in Numbers!" eighteen year- old

⁶⁷ Nancy Adamson, "Our History/Histories," *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 60.

⁶⁸ *Prairie Woman* 3 (August/September, 1979): 12.

Jean Leggett formerly of Toronto remembered coming out in a group of radical-lesbian students. Having dropped out of school, she headed west and ended up in Edmonton to discover that there was no visible lesbian community at the time. Leggett explained:

I knew Edmonton has a large gay and lesbian population. There was an organized [male] gay movement but since I am a woman I was primarily concerned with working with other women. And lastly, the few feminist groups that I did manage to find were apolitical, conservative (i.e., afraid of being called radical lesbians, thus losing credibility), and very unfocused. Of course, this is not true of all the women's groups in Edmonton; a number of groups are limited due to funding restrictions, others are very specific service agencies; however, one fact remains consistent—our [lesbian] community was invisible and undefined.⁶⁹

Leggett viewed local feminist groups as weak and ineffectual.

Nonetheless, one of the participants of this study recalls the radical feminist groups did not have much to do with them because they regarded the social agenda of *Womonspace* as “fluff” and “and considered us unintellectual.”⁷⁰ Perhaps such a view is explained in part by intellectual elitism. Lynn Fraser, a spokesperson for the Lesbian Mothers Defense Fund in Calgary, suggests “the reason straight women feel so threatened by lesbians is because they have to look at their own sexuality.”⁷¹ Clearly, many lesbians organized around lesbian identity and more specifically, lesbian cultural and social pursuits.

Gays and lesbians interested in human rights activism joined a collective called Gay and Lesbian Awareness (GALA) formed in 1984 to lobby Alberta's Human Rights Commission's recommendation to include protection of gays and lesbians in Alberta's Individual Rights

⁶⁹ Jean Leggett, “There is Strength (and Safety) in Numbers!” *Womonspace News* 1, no. 10 (October, 1983): 3.

⁷⁰ NLPC, Laura, [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁷¹ Ibid., *Edmonton Journal* 25 May 1983.

Protection Act.⁷² GALA's Civil Rights Committee consists of an ad hoc group of women and men working for political change. Among other accomplishments, GALA wrote letters and petitions and met with Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), the media, and various professional groups to initiate actions towards political change. Much of GALA's activities took place at the home of Michael Phair, who is currently a MLA. GALA gained the support of several Womonspace members including interviewee Maureen Irwin.

Generally, the focus upon political activism in recent lesbian history has obscured the important gains made by women who foresaw the value of creating social bonds. Womonspace member Jill describes the sentiment between feminists and lesbians at the time as "they [feminist] were doing the real thing and we [lesbians at Womonspace] were doing nothing."⁷³ As a result, members of Womonspace were all too aware of gaping divisions between lesbians with no political agenda and lesbian-feminists who believed a political stance was necessary in such an organization as theirs. In spite of political differences, lesbian participation in social occasions noticeably increased.

Lesbians increased their visibility as activists in both the women's movement and for gay and lesbian rights. They also understood the importance of social networks for creating greater bonds. While recognizing the significant strides made by the women's movement in Canada, lesbians noted the limitations of a feminist viewpoint that did not make the link between patriarchy and heterosexism. Therefore, lesbians challenged the trappings of heterosexism by forming cultural artifices of their own making. Members of Womonspace critiqued prescribed gender and

⁷²Liz Massiah, "GALA Civil Rights," *Womonspace News* 3, no.3 (March 1985): 2.

⁷³ NLPC, Jill, [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

sexual codes by creating a vision of a community based upon the social, cultural, and recreational needs of lesbians.

In the words of long-time member Maureen Irwin, Womonspace offered community social support and accomplished feats established political groups overlooked.

Womonspace offered social support enough times we downplay that part of it but it fulfilled a really important function. We [lesbians] have in 20 years changed the world in a way that I never dreamed possible when I came out If everyone just joined Womonspace to have fun, that would never have happened.⁷⁴

Irwin extolled the importance of social networks to long-term gains for the lesbian community.

The appropriation of social space led to greater public acceptance, equality, and civil liberties. The increase in social networks is an extension of the political.

The shortage of activities in Edmonton for lesbians prompted the formation of Womonspace. Consequently, the group filled a void not wholly met by the more politized gay and feminist liberation groups. Lesbians participated in pot-lucks, women's coffee houses, and movie nights put on by the Women's Centre and by Womonspace. These outlets proved popular over the years and improved social networks. The important distinction here is an insistence upon building a visible lesbian community by social means. Not all lesbians grappled with lesbian-feminist theoretical work nor engaged in an on-going analysis of oppression— or felt the need to. Members of Womonspace instinctively felt that greater social spaces for lesbians was the key to strengthening community bonds.

⁷⁴ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARDS COMMUNITY: ALL THINGS SOCIAL TO ALL GAY WOMEN ?

This chapter consists largely of the recollections of members of Womonspace and includes the perceptions, stories and memories of lesbians active in the organization prior to and after the formation of Womonspace, Edmonton's longest running lesbian group to emerge on the prairies. The oral narratives chronicle specific events concerning the local gay and lesbian community. These include detailed accounts of the club scene, the central role of the Gay Alliance Towards Equality in Edmonton (GATE), the Gay and Lesbian Association (GALA), and the important social gains made by Womonspace. The founding members of Womonspace hoped their organization would be "all things social to all gay women in the city. . . ."¹ However, for various reasons the anticipated role of Womonspace appears to have fallen short of those aspirations.

In 1981, GATE informed the group that policy called for mixed dances only. Yet, organizers repeatedly asked and expected women to assist in the preparation for dances that drew mostly large numbers of gay men. Actually, GATE did not allow or provide for women-only events. The thought at the time was that gay men and lesbians should work closely together. And they did for the most part in such organizations as GATE and, later, GALA. But still, what was available in Edmonton's gay and lesbian community did not meet the expectations of lesbians. According to the most prominent founder of the organization, Joan, lesbians wanted a place

¹ "Womonspace Notice," 28 June 1982 (Courtesy of Womonspace).

geared for their own social interests because “many of the men were very disdainful of us and clearly did not want us in ‘their’ space.”² This feeling was particularly evident in the clubs.

As a result, Joan describes a troublesome form of tension between gay men and lesbians that permeated mixed events and organizations:

Much of this [sexism] was perceived to be subtle, but now of course, if guys talked and acted the way they did then, we [lesbians] would not call it subtle. The main reason we started Womonspace was that [lesbians did not feel] comfortable in the larger gay community, and that organizations at the time had the idea that they should be mixed and wrote their bylaws to reflect that notion. They did not allow women only events because, of course, they were meant to be mixed. We got so tired of . . . meetings in either the Gay Alliance Towards Equality [GATE], Dignity, which was fairly new at the time, or some other groups.³

Sexism posed particularly disturbing outcomes for lesbians participating in mixed groups. Joan calls attention to a space where women could develop their own social networks and become self-reliant organizers.

I felt that it was imperative that we [Edmonton lesbians] do something for ourselves, both physically and psychologically. We needed a place to be ourselves without the resentful glares from the guys, definitely not all the guys, [but] the discomfort of never having our own activities in the community, of not being in touch with each other, of never having a forum in which to speak our truth, or a platform in which to stand with our ideas, goals, actions as lesbians/women.⁴

She holds that, by organizing, women empowered themselves and learned important skills such as arranging their own events, dances, and discussion groups, and by doing so, improved the self-image of lesbians in the community.

Nearly twenty years ago, Womonspace was merely an idea that took shape in the minds of

³NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 17 August 1999.

⁴NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 12 October 1999.

a few individuals struck by the lack of social activities available to them. These women became acquainted with each other primarily at GATE. Many lesbians felt slighted by GATE's predominately male board. On the other hand, women had the opportunity to join the organization and make their presence known on the board. Many lesbians believed that existing gay organizations did not pay particular attention to feminist issues.

The bylaws of GATE advocated mixed events to promote the unification of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Lesbians felt minimized by the larger gay community and identified a need for a specifically lesbian space. Bars are one type of meeting place and some lesbians preferred them to structured organizations. However, the turbulent club scene was not the safest option for others. As it was, Edmonton clubs frequently bought into sexist and homophobic stereotypes that cast lesbians as aggressive troublemakers.

Joan and others describe the clubs as "very uncomfortable for us." She remembers that some of the men objected to women entering gay bars. All the same, clubs provided a central meeting place to countless lesbians and as Joan puts it, "Heaven knows, there would have been no where to go at all without them."⁵ Women at GATE realized that something more was needed for the lesbians of Edmonton. All the same, lesbian activists had opportunities to do 'political work' in public forums and some women found their social needs met by bars, those who safeguarded their privacy had fewer options. In the words of Joan:

It was not long after some of us had been to yet another meeting at GATE and had been told that we could not have one night a week for just women. After being asked one more time to work their dances, which in fact, were quite enjoyable, and after we had sat as a group for coffee or something, and were griping about the treatment, I got the idea to see

⁵NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 17 August 1999.

if we could organize a dance just for women. I started talking it up, and it didn't take long to get enough interest. I must say we got good support from GATE. They [members of GATE] were quite willing to train us to do the organizing, to tell us what we would need for it, to lend us support with their liquor license and the money for the dance, to tell us how much booze to buy, etc. ⁶

GATE changed its position in hopes of furthering lesbian interest in the organization.

However, support was conditional on two fronts. First, there was to be no apparent indication of GATE's involvement. The reason for this was that GATE was legally a mixed organization and support of a lesbian-only dance went against its constitution. Second, all proceeds from the dance reverted back to GATE. This last condition proved to be a temporary setback. In September 1981, Gate finally agreed to advance money to hold Edmonton's very first women's only dance. The women raised enough money amongst themselves to put on a second dance followed by a third. GATE advertised dances and other functions in its facility and by word of mouth. The dances were very successful and the women participants promptly paid GATE what they owed.

The main reason for GATE's involvement was to facilitate access to a liquor license. Joan believes that the response to their efforts demonstrated the incredible need in the community for a comfortable meeting place. It was only a matter of time before Joan and others started talking about doing something on a more permanent basis. She remembers conferring with others who helped put on the dances. Two months later, they had their first meeting with somewhere between seven to twelve people in attendance. "We were all floundering around to figure out what to do. Many of us had been in groups at some level, but not as actual organizers."⁷ To formalize the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

group, the founders wrote a series of guidelines, and to draw the bylaws before declaring themselves an official society.

Joan appears to be the instigator of an emerging woman-space. Up until this point, all lesbians really had was Flashback, a bar that opened its doors to women on Tuesday nights. Womonspace, on the other hand, could hold other kinds of social functions such as coffee houses, rap sessions, informal drop-ins, and organized dances. An early addition to the Womonspace newsletter stated that members “felt that if there was one central organization through which all the ideas and energy flowed, it would be easier to accomplish the objectives. The central group would be there for emotional, organizational, and hopefully, eventually, financial support.”⁸ According to this same insert, many of the women involved in Womonspace worked the phone-lines at GATE and frequently heard frustrated callers complaining about the lack of places lesbians could go. “Where are the lesbians and why is nothing available for women in the city?”⁹ was an all too common complaint.

Beginning with the first dance, Joan and Ann actively participated in support roles. By 1981, preparations were underway for a full-scale organization. Ann became the deejay for a number of Womonspace dances. All it took was one dance to start imaginations running. By then they realized:

It was time for some kind of lesbian group here in Edmonton We called together the eight or so women involved in the dances and had our first meeting. Those eight women became the first executive and included Ann, Jeanne, Linda, Cherene, Darlene, Shirl, and

⁸ “Womonspace: What Is It?” 1984, loose sheet, no month listed. (Courtesy of Womonspace)

⁹ Ibid.

Candy.¹⁰

According to Joan, three of the women on the board had been GATE counsellors and one woman established the Womyn's Collective in Calgary. In an interview with *FinePrint*, Joan describes:

[Members have] very strong feelings about it [Womonspace] working. We [Womonspace members] have bookkeepers, secretaries, postal workers and a writer involved. All are driven by fulfilling our dream of obtaining our own space. . . . We have some feminists but we're a very young organization. There's boundless skills out there. We all have jobs and every job has its skills.¹¹

Plans included having a coffee house, organizing a camping trip, and helping the Edmonton Lesbian Collective sponsor the film "Word is Out." Organizers planned six dances for the first year. In addition, the group organized a gym night and met regularly to play volleyball.

Maureen Irwin, a long time member of GATE and GALA elaborates:
I do know that a group of women wanted to hold a dance . . . and they came to GATE and were told its in the bylaw and we [GATE] can't do that. The thing was for men and women to work together. GATE used to have a couple of dances a year as a court. . . . [,] the Court of the Wild Roses and you could go to that and all the drag queens would be on one side and the dykes on the other. They're were no lipstick lesbians that I saw! [Maureen laughs] They were dykes and you knew that! Dances were held at the Odd Fellows Lodge. It was wonderful. . . . you can't explain it. It was such an empowering feeling to walk in and see all these lesbians in one place. You don't know any of this shit because you are living in a marriage raising your kids so you come out and they are really glad to see you.¹²

Maureen's expressive gestures and elated voice indicated the freeing experience it was for many women who knew too well the loneliness and isolation that occurs prior to finding a suitable social group.

Sixty-four year-old Irwin came out relatively late in life at the age of forty-two. She

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Brian Chittock, "Fine Conversations," *FinePrint* 1, no.3 (April, 1983):7.

¹² NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

remembers a list going around the dance floor asking for signatures from women who wanted an organization of their own. That night, a dozen or more women included their names to the petition in support of a woman's only group. Soon the group set up an executive which served as a steering group between the core group and the general membership. The executive and membership agreed that all decisions made between them would take place at general meetings.

For Joan, there were benefits of working together and seeing the group of women learn from their enriching experiences.

I remember musing that Womonspace would be a wonderful opportunity for women to learn organizing, planning and cooperation which would show them that they are, indeed, smart and capable. My hope was that would boost their self-image, which in the long run would strengthen our community. I was hoping that being involved in putting on events and watching the results of their efforts would be empowering for women.¹³

Her vision included strengthening the self-image of Edmonton lesbians in an effort to promote self-reliance and independence.

It took about two months of meeting each Thursday to write drafts of the constitution. The group formed a legal society in December 1982 when executive filed the necessary forms to the Companies Branch of the Alberta Government. Prior to obtaining official society status, women became members simply by attending the general meetings and placing their names and addresses on a list. A small membership fee made it possible for more lesbians to join Womonspace events. The group wanted to hold dances on a monthly basis. Since volunteers are necessary for any nonprofit society, members usually gave some time and effort to help organize functions. As was the case, the dances drew large crowds well beyond the general membership of

¹³ NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 14 May 1999.

Womonspace.

While the dances proved highly popular, some problems arose during the first few functions. Joan explains:

What I saw, as our dances progressed, is that though we [Womonspace] had a number of fights in some of the earlier dances, that began to slow down after a while. We had to take measures to see to it that they did not continue, of course. We had to ban a few women from the dances for specified periods of time. We also always had some sort of security at dances, and we had the police more than once in the beginning because of fights. But as time went on, and as people realized we meant business, we had less and less of that happening.¹⁴

Some form of security was always present at the dances to deter inebriated patrons from causing disturbances amongst themselves. Generally speaking, Womonspace dances had fewer episodes of alcohol-related incidences as volunteers became more skilled at organizing such events. As it was, the dances were open to non-members including some who were not aware or concerned with the group's call for a safe and comfortable environment.

Obtaining legal status made Womonspace eligible for its own liquor license, thereby removing dependence on other groups for that part of social functions. That first year, Womonspace did not have its own newsletter and so the group posted a list of activities and events at GATE, Common Woman Books, and at Every Woman's Place (EWP), locations that were sure to attract some lesbian interest. By October 1982, Womonspace published its first newsletter calling attention to the social, recreational, and educational resources provided by the group.

In looking back, the women admitted to being somewhat unprepared for the

¹⁴ NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 18 November 1999.

organizational work involved in establishing Womonspace. Maureen offers the following observations:

The fact that initially when Womonspace was formed, when there wasn't a lot of money, everybody did it in groups of volunteers so that people came in and set it all up. The biggest thing was [how] all the food was prepared and cut up and you could come to the kitchen and see a dozen people working. And for years, setting up dances was a good way to socialize. They [would] come to the dances, the drop-ins and to the halls, make a salad, cut meat or do the tables. Eventually they would be comfortable enough to meet other people and make arrangements to meet ahead of time or afterwards. And I know when I was dance co-ordinator it was my responsibility to make sure everyone knew someone.¹⁵

Longtime member Marie stresses that Womonspace gave its members the opportunity to use their newly learned skills elsewhere. She observes:

And we paid attention to women who had kids and set up activities for them. I don't think we [Womonspace organizers] automatically knew how to organize, how to run meetings, how to set up a library, host a drop-in or welcome newcomers. But we learned and knew that what we were doing was building communities. A lot of people who started working with the dances moved on to different things. . . . One of the reasons that made Womonspace work is that we are the "learning ones." The feminist ones were with GALA and the university groups but we learned what having a safe place was all about. I don't want to say we were not the intellectual ones but we downplay our intelligence and our political interest so as not to jeopardize the safety of women. And yet a lot of intelligent interactions at dances and discussions took place.¹⁶

At one point, the group passed a questionnaire around asking the membership whether more political involvement by the group was desirable. The great majority, as it turned out, wanted the focus to remain social.¹⁷ The organization upheld a social commitment that went beyond the politics of a few individuals. Those women who wanted to get more politically involved could do

¹⁵ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

¹⁶ NLPC, Marie, [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

¹⁷ NLPC, Lynn, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 12 May 1999.

so with GATE, and later GALA.

Building a community remained top priority with the group. Since not all members were “out” to their families, friends and co-workers, a certain risk remained for them. Political activism meant greater public scrutiny and media attention. And, according to Laura, the feminist group, who met at EWP, seldom interacted with others socially because “they considered us unintellectual. . . [and] just involved in social stuff. We had our meetings the same night some times. Later, [we would] go for coffee across the street and [they would] sit at a separate table and never talk to us.”¹⁸ In the eyes of the women, the goals of Womonspace seemed relatively trivial in comparison to their own work for women’s rights.

Marie joined in 1981 as a founding member and contributed to both the first official meetings and the drafting of the constitution. Having sat as president of the organization for a period of time, she was also involved in GALA, as well as the Alberta Lesbian Action Committees of the 1970s. Marie compares the position of Womonspace to that of a juggler: she observed “the difference between lesbian feminists and non-feminist lesbian viewpoints”¹⁹ was potentially disruptive. The membership was not politically active at that time. In some ways, Womonspace sought a middle course between two extremes. However, Joan contends that the major body of the membership was not politically active at the time.²⁰

Lynn joined Womonspace in 1983 as a volunteer and currently works as the editor of the newsletter. For Lynn, the existence of the newsletter is a political statement in and of itself.

¹⁸ NLPC, Laura, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

¹⁹ NLPC, Marie, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

²⁰ NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 17 August 1999.

Because the newsletter linked the lesbian community to Womonspace, a political outcome was inevitable. The objective of the group was to reach as many lesbians in the community as possible. The onus was on safety and provision of protective space for its members who may not have felt secure otherwise. The emphasis on privacy is explanatory in itself. The majority of members wanted some way of safeguarding their privacy from others who may have looked adversely on their lesbianism. The majority of Edmonton lesbians and especially members of Womonspace feared repercussions. The important point is that women who felt it was riskier to join a politically focused organization joined Womonspace instead.

No stranger to political activism, Jill spent many years in San Francisco, and experienced the local club scene in Edmonton during the 1970s. She remembers a time when there was a great deal of risk involved in coming-out as a lesbian.

I can't speak for Womonspace since I dropped out and went to San Francisco— but I was around in the 1970s when the women who ran the bars . . . ran the hookers as well— but the whole point of publishing those lists— if you go back in history before things came out with the *Body Politic* and the memories of people getting outed and [about] Anita Bryant and the marches[,] I remember having the police photographing all 300 of us. The police were tracking it [protestors] since they took over from the R.C.M.P. I thought a lot of us didn't realize the reality of gays and lesbians in backwoods Alberta. I was on the offensive with my work as a postal [employee].²¹

Reaction to the campaigns of born-again Christian Anita Bryant raged across Canada and increased gay resistance which prompted further police harassment of gays and lesbians. On 29 April 1978, Edmonton groups organized a coalition to answer Anita Bryant and staged a gay protest demonstration. It is this particular event to which Jill refers.

Lynn's experiences with backlashes was not so severe but equally revealing. According to

²¹ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

her:

I was aware of the tracking of gays and lesbians as well. . . ; I remember when I was with Womonspace in the early 1980s having my phone tapped. At the time I was living with someone who was the secretary-treasurer of postal workers and with someone else who had been active in the Young Communists of Canada. We had no idea why our phone was tapped, maybe for all three of us. I found out about the tapping from someone who worked at the phone company.²²

Marie speculates: "It was because we were gay and lesbian, that's why our phones were tapped for our social meetings— whether we were confused for communists or whatever— we were very left-wing." She feels surveillance is a fact of life for many left-wing groups, gays and lesbians included. Whether these women were at risk they perceived a certain risk to visible involvement. Moreover, gays and lesbians, whatever their politics, are cast as left-wing simply due to their sexual orientations.

Maureen Irwin whose commitment to GATE and GALA exceeds the social focus of Womonspace adds this:

The feminists that were there at the beginning were leftist. I was there on the periphery more or less but was aware of the leftist and socialist stance of radical feminists and some gay groups. Some people were indeed communists. We just wanted the same rights [that] was all. I don't doubt my name is on every list across the board. I was one of the only women on the board of GALA and GATE at the time. There had been other women on the board of GATE but they had left for whatever reason. It was my decision to stay. I really thought that women and gays should work together for equality. Three or four women who were really active in Womonspace chose to leave GATE.²³

The question arises as to whether political lesbians believed that GATE adequately backed lesbian issues. Some felt that the organization concentrated on issues that directly affected gay men (age of consent laws, for instance). Jill believes that "the more politically active women leaned towards

²² NLPC, Lynn, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

²³ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

their lesbian sisters and lesbian separatism.”²⁴ In contrast, identity issues superseded political rights issues and formed the basis of Womonspace activities.

Separatism for them is not about living in an all-female environment. It does not hold the same meaning for them as it did among LOOT members of Toronto. There is no one way to dress, no set rules typifying a lesbian model of society. Womonspace does not concern itself with working class issues or liberationist politics. Instead, the group involves itself with social activities as a way to build a community. Although, it is possible to argue that the group had the social support and financial means to pursue such activities, this may be a function of the fact that Womonspace became active after 1980 and the demise of LOOT and other such groups. The advent of support agencies for a variety of general interests was that much greater. Thus, a political or liberationist mandate was not as fundamental for women organizing.

The contentious issues that arose between gay men and lesbians became apparent. Jill, for example, remembers distinct power struggles waged between the sexes.

My brother was involved in GATE and all his friends, too. They considered women infected ax-wounds. They really had a big problem with women. There was such disparity between the power that women did not have and the power that men did have. And the women that were powerful found themselves at loggerheads. It got to the point where there was a big explosion and everyone said “fuck you.”²⁵

Jill describes a particularly tense situation attributed to sexist gay male bar patrons.

Maureen, however, remembers it differently and sees far more co-operation between gay men and women as a result of GATE. Incidentally, later she recalls a male friend of hers saying, “The problem is that gay men and women don’t get along. We could have parties together. . .and

²⁴ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

²⁵ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

we got along but when this feminist shit came around that all changed.”²⁶ Many gay men blamed radical feminism for shifting an otherwise tolerable situation; while others continued to work together for political change.

Coming-out in the 1970s and prior to Womonspace generally meant coming-out into the bar scene and to Club 70 or Flashback. Since more options had gradually become available to lesbians, coming out in the 1980s held fewer risks. Nonetheless, the process remained the same--searching out a community or social space to meet with other lesbians. Jill illustrates the challenges she faced as a young lesbian.

I remember coming in from California and coming with my partner and we'd drive for two hours to come in and neither of us smoked at the time. If you didn't smoke and drink, it was really hard with the pressure in our community to get high, or whatever, and a lot of people do drink. I think to be fair in the days of Club 70 one of the problems when you came out was the pressure from the academics and the political types who didn't necessarily go to the clubs. All the while you had on your tight T-shirts and your cigarettes tucked under the sleeve with your slicked back hair and your polished shoes just army right (and damn near all of them worked for the army!) The first time I went to Club 70, I was 16 years old. I went in with my moccasins and long braided hair and I got hit on by everybody in the room, and panicked! . . . Two years later at 18, the whole crowd [by then] changed. It was a much rougher crowd.²⁷

In a very personal way, Jill expresses her apprehensions concerning where she fit in between the bar dykes and the academic and politically motivated gays she encountered. At only sixteen years old, Jill found herself moving between two social extremes.

Moreover, according to JD “Butch and Femme was very much a part of the scene and to come out and just feel like a woman who loved women was difficult because everyone wanted to

²⁶ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

²⁷ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

stereotype you.”²⁸ As a young lesbian new to the “scene” and very much a woman-identified-woman, JD remembers a visible generation gap between younger dykes and older women in the bars who identified as either butch or femme. Lesbian-feminists routinely disparaged butch and femme couples because they viewed such couples as aping heterosexuals. According to Laura, butch and femme women kept to themselves and, as Jill notes, they formed a minority within the Edmonton bars. She elaborates:

At Club 70, most of the men and women got along and yet there was a subculture that got along very well, a lot of non-feminist lesbians who were very butch-femme. Christ, it was down to a fine art. The other truth is I never understood why there was so much anger, so much internalized rage. It wasn’t until I lived in the Ghetto at Oakland that I understood that people are oppressed and they have to fight someone. You can’t fight the people with the power: you are oppressed so you fight amongst yourselves.²⁹

Obviously, some lesbians felt more at ease with Club 70 than others. Some suggest there was little or no fighting while others say there were incidents of conflict. Jill, for one, remembers:

Club 70 was rough and there was a bit of a problem when women would dance because a whole group of men didn’t like looking at women and started getting angry and over-reacting, and then you had a lot of drinking. Also you had women that were butch and bulldyke and they would say no man is going to tell them that they couldn’t fucking come in so they tore the place to shit. There was a period of time when Club 70 was a very rough place. . . . I remember by the time I was 18 there was a different crowd one that was very hard. There was a lot of fighting and a lot of drugs not to mention a lot of animosity between men and women. For instance, a lot of undermining of the women went on. The rules always shifted so that it was against the women and the anger and animosity grew. It was the end of the butch and femme era and very much the ‘hetero’ model of the lesbian couple.³⁰

This research found evidence of rifts between the social objectives of gay men and lesbians in the

²⁸ City of Edmonton Public Archives, Maureen Irwin, “A Partial Chronology of the Edmonton/Lesbian Gay History,” (1996):2. (File not sorted by #)

²⁹ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

³⁰ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

context of gay bars. Bouncers at gay bars sometimes either severely limited access by lesbians or ejected them.

For many lesbians, the dances sponsored by Womonspace provided an ideal alternative to mixed social settings. In this instance, Maureen compares her impressions of Flashback to a dance put on by Womonspace:

A friend was working part-time at the *Edmonton Journal's* library. She was the first person I came out to. One day she said to me, "Are you going to the *Journal* dance?" Well, I said, I really don't know. If I go, I'd like to take my girlfriend. "Oh" she says "that's very interesting . . . where do you go?" And I said, "no where." So she says to me you have to get out into the community. Why don't you meet my girlfriend and we will go to Flashback. After I walked in there, I said "Jesus, I don't belong here!" I am a 42 year old women, this is crazy. So I went right back to the car and said to this woman, you're right, I don't belong in society. I can see why all these people live in the closet. This is shit. I can't do this. I'll go back to being just alone with my drop-in lover. But then, Corrine mentioned a big dance coming up on Thursday night. I wasn't sure about it but going in there and seeing a room full of dykes after all those weirdos at the other place I was convinced. The next thing you know a group of us thought we would buy an apartment building to hold meetings. I put my name on a list. We had the meeting and we were sitting on the floor as I prepared to mortgage my house when my four kids yelled "Get back down there and take your name off that! We're depending on you!" Three of us wanted to buy a women's centre.³¹

Idealism aside, nothing came of that venture. Needless to say, Irwin did not mortgage her house, but the zeal with which she describes these events shows how excited she was to meet other lesbians at a lesbian-only dance.

The dance she refers to was Womonspace's first unofficial community dance. Flashback catered to a mixed clientele and what seems like "weirdos" to her. As a mother of four children and working at the *Edmonton Journal*, she saw Flashback as seedy. Though it was not specifically made up of working-class gays and a few lesbians, Flashback was located in the warehouse

³¹ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

district and attracted a rougher crowd. In some ways, Womonspace offered middle-class, educated lesbians a central meeting place of their own. Irwin, for one, recalls just wanting to be around “nice women” which is why she joined GATE and later, Womonspace.³²

Lynn “came out” in the early 1980s. At the time, Flashback was located at 104th Street with the Roost just across the street. According to her:

[Women] were not allowed at Flashback with the exception of Tuesday nights beginning near the end of 1980. Soon, the Roost opened up to women. We [lesbians] could go but it got worse and worse at Flashback. I remember when they [management at Flashback] had a policy that lesbians had to pay an extra dollar to get in because they caused so much damage. . . . [Womonspace] offered an alternative to the club scene for many lesbians who didn’t want to be a part of all that.³³

Furthermore, Jill views the bar scene as having little to offer most lesbians. Club bouncers ejected barmykes on a regular basis and barred lesbians from entering Club70, Flashback, and the Roost for periodic boisterous or violent behaviour. The few “clubbers” that behaved poorly ruined it for others. Jill elaborates:

Flashback . . . was basically mafia run with organized crime. At the time, it was run by two women who ran all the hookers on the streets. So they were the madams or pimps for most of the hookers in the area. They organized the clubs so that they could sell drugs and liquor circulated freely. At some point, they threw the dykes out because they were fighting all the time and the men didn’t do that. Men had other bars too and women only had Flashback to go to. Back then, you never had the money or political clout to do anything. And the political dykes never showed up to Club 70 ever.³⁴

Jill’s impression that Flashback was mafia-run is speculation and cannot be substantiated.

The Roost provided an alternative to Flashback and Club 70, but it, too, was mainly a men’s club.

³² NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

³³ NLPC, Lynn, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

³⁴ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

Women were invited to join a year later since the club was not doing so well. Shane Lavender explains:

For those of you who [do not] remember, the first year after Club 70 closed, there were a lot of fights among the women at the Roost. Because of that, Gene (one of the managers) had to clamp down on who they let in. [Bouncers] just kept an eye out for any trouble. In the past couple of years, they have had no problems of this sort, and, Gene said, he doesn't think there will be any in the future.³⁵

Indeed, the Roost opened its doors to women on Friday nights and began making memberships available to them as well.

How lesbians dealt with discrimination and sexism in the bars is fairly revealing. Most lesbians entering bars were not looking for trouble. Many, like Maureen, dropped in and never went back. Some experienced Edmonton's bar culture with mixed feelings. As Jill puts it, "You'd come in and hang around the guys and the straight couples or swingers who used to come in. And then you'd have some guy doing the bump and grind with your girlfriend to prove he was the man and could get away with that."³⁶ Lynn, for instance, recounts a time when she was manhandled by a straight patron who thought she was getting too close to his girlfriend. For Joan, her experiences with the clubs were equally disconcerting. She explains:

I remember dreaming that we could have a wonderful, loving community, free of some of the harsher elements that I was seeing in the clubs when I came out, which was only a couple of years before we started working on *Womonspace*. I believe that has to some extent happened. Of course, there are always people who for whatever reason of their own do what they want. But if here [*Womonspace*] is already a place to go that is comfortable, then they can start out just a tad farther ahead. At least, that is my hope.³⁷

³⁵ Shane Lavender, "Editorial," *Womonspace News* 1, no.11(November,1983): 6.

³⁶ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

³⁷ NLPC, Joan, Personal E-mail, Joan to Noelle Lucas, 18 August 1999.

The vision Joan and others have of a benign microcosm set off from the harsher elements that differentiate the bar scene is rather idealistic. All the same, Womonspace presented a practical alternative.

Fortunately, Edmonton lesbians could participate in a number of other activities outside the club scene. As writer JD explains: "There were all women basketball teams and all women baseball teams playing in organized leagues. Certainly many dykes were on the teams, women . . . from 20 years to 45 years. . . . Most socializing was in women's homes."³⁸ And as Marie remarks:

We met each other and would go off to do activism or whatever. The golfing group, dancing, the Apollo group [made up of lesbians in sports], the spiritual groups, and the drop-ins. We now have more options that didn't exist in the past and have made things much more visible. In the past, it was very closeted, still. They [lesbians] went to the dances, [and joined] the sports teams. They were there but they never went to the meetings, nor submitted to the newsletters but they were there [for the events and activities].³⁹

Outreach to rural lesbians was another means the organization used to build community. Catherine remembers the long difficult process involved in locating a community. Catherine and her partner commuted from Vegreville to Edmonton: "We kept mostly to ourselves for the first six or seven years when the isolation was beginning to get to us. . . . I had an incredible thirst for lesbian content and was eager to meet other lesbian couples to establish friendships."⁴⁰ Eventually, she attended a Womonspace dance and started writing the occasional article for the newsletter. In Catherine's words:

I believe Womonspace has been a saviour for not only my sanity but also my relationship.

³⁸ Edmonton Public Archives, Maureen Irwin, *A Partial Chronology* 2.

³⁹ NLPC, Marie, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁴⁰ NLPC, Catherine, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

We gradually began to trust the people we met and ourselves. The rural community can be very isolating. Sure, we had friends but most of them are straight. They may sympathize with you but I don't believe they can truly understand how you feel regarding issues about yourself or lesbian relationships. These feelings are something only other lesbians can truly understand. In fact I find it very difficult to discuss intimate details about my relationship with my straight friends. I guess it's a matter of feeling comfortable. I don't like putting them in an uncomfortable situation.⁴¹

For Catherine, internalized homophobia affected her own coming-out. Like Maureen, she was once married: "Looking back I was a dyke through and through but it took me years to realize it. Once I realized I was a lesbian it took me more time to come to terms with it and feel comfortable."⁴²

Maureen suggests one of the more important functions of Womonspace have to do with the informal drop-ins. Unlike GATE, drop-ins did not involve any peer counselling or referral services. She explains:

We [members of Womonspace] talked about it for a long time and a decision was made that GATE, now GLCCE, would provide that sort of service to bisexuals, transgendered, and lesbian persons. There was no need to duplicate it here. We were merely here for coffee and someone to chat with. If you talk to various people in the community, you will find that many people came into the community that way. . . . What I remember is women coming one night a month on a Thursday night and spending time having coffee and making that first connection with the community. They would read about things going on in the newsletter and know their was a drop-in and wouldn't go into a dance. This was something they could do.⁴³

The welcoming committee was another important function of Womonspace dances. According to Marie, "the welcoming committee would take charge and make sure no one was left sitting alone. When someone walked in that [no one] recognized the committee would make sure

⁴¹ NLPC, Catherine, Personal E-mail, Catherine to Noelle Lucas, 25 October 1999.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

they were not left alone.”⁴⁴ Once more, the money made from the dances went a long way to keeping Womonspace open. As Marie suggests, the dances did well because the price of liquor at the bars was much more and women by and large have less money to spend than men. It offered a cheaper alternative for many.

For a long time, the money made from the dances and other social events went into a building fund. Having the means to purchase their own building was a central objective for many years. But according to sources for this research, \$17,000 mysteriously disappeared. As it turned out, the treasurer, a woman by the name of “Clare” embezzled funds in 1984 and 1985.⁴⁵ For legal reasons, the newsletter made no mention of this loss. Elaine explains: “Right from the beginning, it was kept out of the newsletter because of all this liability stuff.”⁴⁶ Eventually, the group obtained a lawyer. At the time Laura had become president of Womonspace. Her girlfriend discovered the missing funds. Says Laura: “We went to the bank [Credit Union] to confirm it and then got on the phone to all the board members. Nobody could believe it and [each would exclaim], ‘I just do not believe it!’ We even had the poor bank manager standing there wondering.”⁴⁷ Laura found out that Clare had been forging her name and the checks did not match the card. Clare’s lawyer was harassing Marie at her job. “He kept phoning me and saying if you don’t grant me an interview, then I will publish names,”⁴⁸ Marie reiterates.

⁴⁴ NLPC, Marie, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁴⁵ “Clare” is an alias.

⁴⁶ NLPC, Laura, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ NLPC, Marie, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

The threat to Womonspace went well beyond the monetary and nearly jeopardized the whole organization. For six months, Laura adds, "the treasurer kept saying she didn't have the papers ready for the annual review." Chuckling to herself and shaking her head, she wonders why they did not piece it together at the time. Later, Laura told me that Clare used to be called "am I for real?" because for seven years nobody could talk about the matter or mention her name.⁴⁹ In spite of such setbacks, Womonspace continued to provide outreach services to both rural and local lesbians.

Other internal problems arose over ideological differences in the organization. Lesbian-feminists criticized Womonspace for not taking a political stand and instead concentrating on social pursuits. Jill was one of those people who for awhile disparaged the lack of commitment to politics taken by the organization. However, she now sees Womonspace differently:

For all the political work I've done and the marching, the fact that Womonspace hung in there and makes a political statement like no other When I was politically fired up, I was telling people that putting the dances together was nothing. So the truth was we [lesbians] alienated ourselves as a community because of that. I have to emphasize I dropped out just as Womonspace was taking off and the group I was involved with was so much more heady and into the political side of things.⁵⁰

Working routinely with GALA for social change, Maureen Irwin describes her personal politics:

While the legislation in Canada has not changed because Womonspace had their dances, [Womonspace] provides a place for people to come out and provides community supports. It's a place to meet with others and meet new partners. It provides the needed social support for many. [Members] tend to down play that part of it. I think we have to recognize that those people who were marching for change stood shoulder to shoulder. Most of them were lesbians which included the GALA people and people associated with

⁴⁹ NLPC, Laura, Personal E-mail, Laura to Noelle Lucas, 9 July 1999.

⁵⁰ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

Womonspace. We have changed in 20 years in ways I never dreamed possible. If everyone had just joined Womonspace to have fun, the world wouldn't have changed. I think the biggest thing anyone has ever done is coming-out and leading our own lives. That is how we change things— by being out. That means being out in the banks, the grocery stores and in the public as much as possible. That is where the activism really takes place.⁵¹

Evidently, social commitments are an extension of political activism. In other words, the personal is the political. After all, the organization prepared the political readiness of some members to participate at other levels of the community. For instance, Irwin points out that a number of Womonspace members became involved with other more political groups such as GALA as a result of their participation in Womonspace. Additionally, lesbians increase their own visibility by identifying themselves as lesbians in public venues. Clearly, social bonds made between women at Womonspace extended political and public participation as well.

Even so, more controversy existed over a situation that involved a representative sent to the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). In 1983, as Maureen puts it, “all hell broke out.” A member of the board, “Jackie,” was very active with GALA at the time. She wanted to be the representative so Womonspace financed her. According to Irwin:

She was very active with all the issues presented at NAC. When she got there, she met other lesbians on the NAC board but lesbianism itself was not addressed and so they immediately formed a lesbian caucus. The problem was that Womonspace did not want a high profile. Upon her return, a particularly divisive meeting was held and people that never came to a Womonspace meeting got out of their stretchers to come. Twenty-five members at the meeting voted for or against the issue. The board consisted of 10 or 12 people and eventually the decision was made to take away [Jackie's] membership.⁵²

As Lynn suggests, when a couple is on the same board, the situation posed a conflict of interest.

According to her:

⁵¹ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁵² Ibid.

[Jackie's] partner at the time, [Liz] was also a member of the board and having a couple on the board raises all sorts of problems. It used to be you had to have meetings before you take an action. So I see this as a personality issue. A person with a strong mind decided to go ahead. There was some approval about it but there wasn't ten meetings or anything because she had to get on the plane and go.⁵³

Marie sees Jackie as a bystander and the real issue was with Liz who was attempting "to push this political thing and she said, If you kick me off the board, it's because you don't want to be political."⁵⁴ The abrupt actions taken by the board went along way to enforcing the non-political directives of the organization upon the more vocal members.

During this time, safety remained a central issue to Womonspace; however, the group used the safeguarding of members as an excuse to rid the organization of two of its more political members. As Lynn suggests:

The issues around expelling these two [Jackie and Liz] had to do with style of operation. Womonspace was pretty much consensus-run organization. Lots of talking [occurred] until agreement was reached. [Liz and Jackie] just went ahead and did things-as is necessary at times and this was the center of the problem. The political involvement angle was just an excuse to get rid of two people causing disharmony. GALA started up and was the gay and lesbian political action group so Womonspace could in good conscience focus on providing a safe place for socializing without the stress of social activism. Anyway the [Jackie and Liz] thing was handled very poorly, in retrospect, and you will get many versions!⁵⁵

During this whole time, because of her interest in politics and her organizational skills, Jackie served as Womonspace's representative to NAC for the annual debate held at the House of Commons. That year, she challenged John Crosbie, Minister of Justice, to amend the Human Rights Code to include gays and lesbians. Both Jackie and Liz faced severe criticism upon their

⁵³ NLPC, Lynn, Personal E-mail, Lynn to Noelle Lucas, 12 July 1999.

⁵⁴ NLPC, Marie, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁵⁵ NLPC, Lynn, Personal E-mail, Lynn to Noelle Lucas, 12 July 1999.

return. According to Liz's recollection:

Eventually, and the details are lost in my memory, I and [Jackie] were told we were being removed from the Board. The details of that message are buried, but I remember some negotiations over who would mediate and when we would meet. Everything culminated in a seven hour meeting with the Board . . . seven hours on a Tuesday night from 7 pm to 2 am. Derwyn Whitbread facilitated (a well-known and respected social worker in town we could all agree on in that role). For all those hours, each woman spoke, dissecting my actions and my words. They attacked [Jackie] but mostly me. Some spoke from notes, others without. The process went on for hours, each person speaking as much as she needed. I do not recall saying much, but perhaps I did.⁵⁶

In an afterthought, Liz argues that internalized homophobia at Womonspace led up to her dismissal. She explains:

Learning from our mistakes [or] errors is crucial. There were many times when I made mistakes. The closet and internalized homophobia were strong in Womonspace and still are. The lack of clarity over having a board member to do education and public work, yet the unwillingness to be identified with a lesbian group is inherently dangerous to all involved. I recall an instance of significant embezzlement occurring within the organization and the decision to not notify the police since it would be known that a lesbian organization existed and had legal problems. This was not a helpful or respectful stance for anyone involved in my opinion. Others may dispute my version of this story, but this is my recollection. The pain and shame and the experiences of shunning stay strongly with me. And I work hard now to be direct, to be respectful and to find healing ways to support safety.⁵⁷

In general, the expulsions served as a means to keep the membership in line with the original safeguarding concerns of the organization. All the same, the group utilized exclusionary methods which appear harsh and conservative in scope. Even so, safety issues whether genuine or imaginary were primary concerns during the 1980s.

According to Marie, it was a consensus decision on the part of Womonspace and its members to take measures to ensure the privacy of individuals. The members did not want people

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

coming in from GATE or GALA to recruit them for committees. Lynn explains, “ during that whole period women were uncomfortable [and some] members [were] very cautious that their names [would] not be seen. They wanted the newsletter, but they wanted the assurance that no one else would get it.”⁵⁸ The organization fiercely protected anonymity and, as Laura admits:

[The group] did not think [it] could [be] that [political] at the time because we [the group] were about social activity and . . . there wasn't too much room there to change our focus. You became “out” and then if you are identifiable then you are an out lesbian and it was not safe to identify lesbians because of the portion of members of our group who didn't want that kind of exposure.⁵⁹

Jill, for instance, remembers a time when her own personal safety was at risk due to her activism. Her involvement with the postal union and her demand for same-sex benefits met with extreme violence. Says Jill, “It got ugly. . . . They [the postal union] were more than threatening, they got physical. Because of that, I chose to get out of politics.”⁶⁰

Because they [other gay members of the postal union] saw what I went through. . . I almost lost my hand [in an altercation] and they were there for the blood and the guts. And when in solidarity with me at the dances or social situations, I knew they were still beside me and I was a part of them which is probably why I didn't go and face them until the very end. I was out there . . . but I almost killed myself and was it worth it? I don't know. But the thing is, a lot of legislation came out of that. It doesn't mean that all the people I worked with lived in fear nor am I saying I am a really strong person. But some of them didn't have the strength it took to get over all the stuff you went through. But to have 13 of them on the dock and you know you're going to be hurt, and there are some that don't want to take that chance and I don't blame them. I think the dances are a political statement because you are saying “I am a lesbian and I am with other lesbians.” It might not be standing there saying “I want this right” but by saying I want to be with lesbians that is a political statement.⁶¹

⁵⁸ NLPC, Lynn, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 12 May 1999.

⁵⁹ NLPC, Laura, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁶⁰ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Debbie admits she is not one to go out on a limb and risk her personal safety. However, she has utilized her experiences at Womonspace to take a stand on women with disabilities.

I have been out for a number of years now and this is the first year that I have felt comfortable being political. I wouldn't have been able to stand by you , Jill, the lesbian activist, because your life is terrifying to me. Yes, I am a lesbian and a lesbian amongst my friends and some of my family knows that and some of my co-workers too. But don't put me out in the newspaper; don't go jumping on the edge. Yes, I encourage other lesbians, but I could not be right out there. And so I admire people like you and I am sorry you had to go through that kind of suffering but how do we teach the younger ones who are trying to figure out their identity and what role to play. . . . The young kids don't realize how we got where we are but just take it for granted. They don't realize that lesbians have had their phones tapped and so on.⁶²

Women such as Debbie did work on the sidelines and still make an important contribution to the lesbian community.

In essence, the group concluded that in order to build community the organization had to maintain a social image to secure a safe place for activities. Therefore, Womonspace minimized the political implications of some decisions. To appeal to the Edmonton-area lesbians, Womonspace had to differentiate itself from other organizations. In the words of Jill:

The dream and goal and desire that gave birth to Womonspace is still alive in many ways. Though it grew from activism what it did do was grow up. Activism gave birth to Womonspace but it grew up to incorporate the larger community and to do that it had to be collaborative. We had to find ways to bring all of it together. To tie it all in it, [Womonspace] understated its 'politicalness.' But, it brought together the [lesbian] community better than anything else, and that is the vision it started out with—building community.⁶³

Jill's point is that community outreach to Edmonton lesbians involved downplaying the political in order to incorporate the greater goal of greater social space. To do this, the group concentrated

⁶² NLPC, Debbie, [pseudo.], Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

⁶³ NLPC, Jill, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

on creating organized social activities while keeping in touch with the political mandates of other organizations.

Clearly, Womonspace devised methods of outreach by organizing activities thought to guarantee the participation of a large number of lesbians. Typically, the organization held various functions to suit the social mandate and to ensure a non-radical reputation. By remaining in contact with other Edmonton gay and lesbian organizations, Womonspace accessed the political and social goals of these groups without jeopardizing its own particular injunctions. In this way, Womonspace essentially relegated the political work to others, understated their own politics, and yet, reached a similar if not more pronounced outcome--a stronger more visible community.

The process of mapping out a community gave women the space to identify as lesbian. Social networking led to women participating in lesbian groups and increased visibility. Identity involves a social identification with others. It requires both individual and shared experiences. For the most part, Womonspace provided a supportive environment in which to develop a more visible, effective lesbian culture. The motivational force driving the group was the desire to provide a social space in which to safely explore lesbianism in the context of other lesbians. By providing leisure activities, the organization extended the social spaces made available to Edmonton area lesbians. At the heart of building community is developing networks to further social change.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMONSPACE NEWS: BUILDING COMMUNITY ONE PAGE AT A TIME

Like most gay and lesbian organizations across North America, Womonspace produced a regular newsletter for their members and prospective members. This trend follows similar grass-roots efforts elsewhere.¹ This chapter illustrates the power of small independent publications to bring gay and lesbian issues to the forefront of public knowledge. In turn, print media launched a framework for Womonspace directives and provided a forum for the discussion of local and national lesbian culture. *Womonspace News* linked the organization to the Edmonton lesbian community by featuring a variety of light-hearted, humorous, and, commonly, serious, newsworthy columns aimed at social change. The newsletter's purpose was to inform the lesbian community about Womonspace and grew to feature essays, short-stories, and controversial opinions.

With the rise of the women's liberation movement, a number of radical, alternative publications began featuring lesbian concerns. Such periodicals as Montreal's *Long Time Coming* (1973-1977), Toronto's *Other Woman* (1972-1977), *GrapeVine* (1979-1980), the newsletter of the Lesbian Mother's Defense Fund (Toronto), Vancouver's *Pedestal: Lesbian-Feminist Newsletter* (1970-1975) and Toronto's *Bellyfull* (1972) and *Broadside* (1979-1981) found their

¹ Robert Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 2.

way into the eager hands of lesbians across Canada.² By far the most left-wing national gay and lesbian liberationist publication was *The Body Politic* (1971-1982). Many lesbians read the *Body Politic* to keep abreast of current issues and human rights actions across Canada. A number of columns for lesbians provided a widening scope of coverage on topics of concern to lesbian-feminists.

By the mid-1970s, lesbian cultural production dramatically increased by accessing both independent and grass-roots presses. Alternative periodicals also fostered the careers of promising lesbian writers. According to alternative press historian Robert Streitmatter, the explicit connection between cultural production and subsequent networking of gays and lesbians increased awareness of gay culture:

Gay journalism played a singular role in leading the movement in this exhilarating new direction. In the mid-1970s, the spate of sensationalistic tabloids that had burned themselves into oblivion were replaced by a wide pastiche of publications— newspapers, magazines, journals—that probed the breadth and depth of the burgeoning lesbian and gay culture. Never before had the gay press felt such freedom to delve below the surface of its readers' lives. And so the publications of this era— from roughly 1973-1977— ultimately created a tangible record of the activities, fantasies, and ideologies gay people valued and cherished as their own.³

The range of material covered by the alternative press presents an exceptional archive of lesbian concerns, themes, and cultural currents across Canada and elsewhere.

Similarly, the number of prominent and imperceptible gay and lesbian networks attests to the scope of gay and lesbian organizing for social as well as political causes. The vast majority of these groups voiced their opinions in grass roots publications including newsletters, fliers, and

² Margie Wolfe, "Working with Words: Feminist Publishing in Canada," in *Still Ain't Satisfied: Canadian Feminism Today* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982), 267.

³ Ibid 2.

bulletins. In her dissertation, historian Kathryn Tracy Adams observes:

What separated the homophile-era publications such as *The Ladder* from the lesbian-feminist publications that followed them after 1969 was a revolution—or more precisely, the congruence of several revolutions. Political and cultural changes in the late 1960s and 1970s, leading to a host of literary and journalistic experimentations, expanded the scope and altered the look, feel, and editorial politics of alternative publishing enterprises⁴

Mainstream newspapers, journals, and magazines as well as book publishers operate on a commercial basis and respond to the demands of the mass market, and thus these profit-making ventures seldom print material in keeping with feminist concerns. Nor are they likely to cover gay and lesbian issues. The mainstream book industry prefers to skirt controversial topics, and despite a significant rise in women's magazines since the 1960s and 1970s, editorial decisions reflect a lifestyle limited to two income families.⁵

On the other hand, most feminist publishers exist on a shoe-string budget and operate primarily for non-profit. Pro-feminist editors promote feminism and social change to a limited audience. Alternative publishers of gay and lesbian material function in a similar capacity. Nonetheless, social activists throughout Canada have made some significant inroads and have provided the needed space to debate such contentious issues as abortion, violence towards women, daycare, and the rights of minorities and same-sex couples.

During the 1970s, activists had little recourse but to express their views in one- and two-person operations. Newspapers like *The Other Woman* (1972-1977), *Kinesis* (1974-), and *Broadside* frequently confronted issues from a lesbian-feminist perspective. *The Saskatoon*

⁴ Kathryn Tracy Adams, *Paper Lesbians: Alternative Publishing And The Politics Of Lesbian Representation in the United States, 1950-1990* Ph. D. diss., (Texas: The University of Texas at Austin, 1994), 180.

⁵ Wolfe, 267-268.

Women's Liberation Newsletter (1974-1975) and its successor *Prairie Woman* (1977-1979) communicated socialist and radical feminist views to rural readers, while *Fireweed* (1978-), a quarterly women's literary magazine, explored the poetic and fictional creative spirit of a new generation. In September 1982, this publication presented a full lesbian issue and featured some lesbian content in almost every successive issue.⁶ Newsletters belonging to non-profit gay and lesbian organizations held a variety of viewpoints and made a concerted effort to reach as many members of the community as possible. *Womonspace News* served in this capacity.

By the 1980s, a growing list of publications catering to gay and lesbian subject matter provided an additional forum for cultural expression. For instance, *Periwinkle* operating out of Victoria published lesbian and gay fiction, erotica, poetry, and spirituality subjects. *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* of Mount St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia included material on lesbian studies, gender issues, and reviewed feminist films and books. Beginning in 1972, Toronto's *The Women's Press* began publishing lesbian fiction, and political and academic subjects from a socialist-feminist point of view. Vancouver's *The Press Gang Publishers* Vancouver published feminist and lesbian fiction, nonfiction, erotica, and political subjects. In turn, *Sister's Vision* of Toronto printed material relevant to the concerns of women of colour. The fortitude of the alternative press offered unlimited potential for the cultural expression of unconventional social and political ideologies.

Protest movements organized around left politics and counter-cultural activities inspired others to join by relaying their messages through a rapidly expanding alternative press. Likewise,

⁶ See *Fireweed: A Quarterly Women's Literary Magazine* Issue #13, September, 1982.

the objectives of the women's movement launched a surplus of publishing activities devoted to liberation. Grass-roots efforts to assert a laudable presence resulted in a spate of publications that probed lesbian and gay culture and increased individual pride and purpose. Womonspace was one of many such organization to understand the importance of journalism to strengthening ties to the lesbian community as a whole. The publication of *Womonspace News* began in 1982, less than a year after the group officially organized as a means of reaching as many lesbians in the Edmonton area as possible. The first issue was merely a few sheets stapled together and listed a small number of events in the planning phases.

In the course of its history, *Womonspace News* covered a gamut of issues, some social in content and others feminist and/or political in outlook. For the most part, the newsletter, like the organization itself strove to achieve a middle course even if it meant masking internal struggles within the organization. For instance, the newsletter did not include coverage of the legal complications stemming from the embezzlement. Nonetheless, contentious issues involving the political nature of the organization were discussed at length. The publication served to promote Womonspace to the greater lesbian population of Edmonton and thus targeted social themes above gay and lesbian rights issues.

An overview of issues from 1981 to 1995 suggests three themes. Earlier issues were more feminist and political in content especially in editorials provided by Jean Noble. From 1985 to 1988, lesbian/woman identity issues appeared to comprise such topics as aging, homophobia, lesbians in relationships, the emotional cost of breaking up, and the practical concerns of physically challenged lesbians. Post-1990 content demonstrates a shift from feminist concerns over pornography and patriarchy to lifestyle themes. Issues examined lifestyle choices and sexual

variation including monogamy versus non-monogamy, sadomasochism and lesbian partner abuse.

Content formed social and cultural themes ranging from vegetarianism, travel, profiles of lesbians in various professions and sports, to humour. Tracking lesbian books, lesbians on film and cultural icons attributed a “lighter” value to the publication and presented more general content. Changes to constitutional rights of gay and lesbian persons were presented from time to time and yet, the publication appeared conservative and of interest primarily to middle-class lesbians. Such a conclusion is evidenced by popular, wide-reaching cultural subject matter.

Moreover, after Lesbian-feminist Jean Noble stepped down from the editorial post in 1985, a forum for radical feminist politics ended. Though guest editorialists provided commentary on a wide range of topics, some political in content, few editorials adopted a decisive tone. The change in content corresponds to a shift in values brought on by a conservative direction in national politics, materialism, and greater acknowledgment of diversity within the larger lesbian community. Still, political dialogue was not uncommon. Regardless of its shortcomings, the newsletter proved a valuable source of information to many of Edmonton’s lesbian population hoping to make connections with others.

The newsletter proclaimed itself the voice of Womonspace to the Edmonton lesbian community. As such, it did not pretend to speak on behalf of all lesbians in the area but instead to served as a venue for members to voice their concerns in print. As well, non-members were also encouraged to submit letters or articles to the newsletter for consideration. The newsletter consisted of editorials, letters to the editor, themes (such as lesbians with disabilities, older lesbians or on coming-out), poetry, non-fiction, and fictional narratives. Over the course of time, some columns have been discontinued and replaced by others. Editors also changed a number of

times, and so did the content and strength of social and political directives.

Letters to the editor were consistent and offer valuable feedback from members and others. The number of pages, cost to members, and design of the publication varied from year to year. Advertisements focused on services offered to gay and lesbian clientele. For instance, Liz, a professional therapist, presented her business card in the publication. GATE advertised its resource services while Common Woman Books advertised itself as Alberta's feminist bookstore.

The first few issues resemble more of a bulletin in format while subsequent issues assumed the appearance of a compact booklet with a brightly coloured exterior, a chosen theme scrolled in large script, and an illustrated cover design.⁷ Images throughout the issues were sparse and range from cartoon quality sketches to the occasional photograph. The newsletter was largely the responsibility of the editor and a host of volunteers. Volunteers helped to circulate each monthly issue at various outlets that catered to the lesbian population. Content and themes as well as potent issues were a matter of group decision.

The November 1983 issue outlined the newsletter policy. The standard determining publishing decreed that any material that was not factual or was found to misrepresent Womonspace was unacceptable. In a letter to the editor, Jean Leggett, a former member of the executive, wrote: "The working definitions of 'detrimental' and 'misrepresent' were not established."⁸ The newsletter committee determined what material fell into these categories. It had to decide what would be published based on group consensus or, at the very least, a majority vote.

⁷ See Appendix I, pp.121-128 for an example of the newsletter format.

⁸Jean Leggett, "Editorial," *Womonspace News* (November, 1983):2.

In cases where the newsletter committee did not reach a decision, it went before the board of directors and possibly to the general membership as well for input. Leggett suggested “the committee reserves the right to reject material which is sexist, heterosexist, and/or racist, and whose sole purpose is to degrade, humiliate or otherwise encroach upon the rights of individuals or a group of individuals.”⁹ Her very useful summary of newsletter criteria captured the nature of the policy to this day. Most events in the course of Womonspace history made the publication. However, editors did not disclose some information to the general membership at all.

According to Marie, the strict editorial policy provided the guidelines to prohibit bias and racist comments yet permitted women to voice their concerns in print. Maureen Irwin’s partner of many years, Sheryl, was editor for a time. As Irwin recalls:

She was editor for two years. She was also my partner up until her death. One of the things she did when she took over the newsletter had to do with her belief that women should tell stories in their own words. She really believed that women should have their own voice. She was a women’s studies graduate from the University of Lethbridge. When women contributed to the newsletter, she [Sheryl] didn’t correct the stories or make changes. She had people calling her and complaining that the writing was unprofessional. But Sheryl really believed women should come across in their own voice and you shouldn’t interfere with that or you take away their agency. She also included their sketches and pictures and was a great believer in touching the soul of women.¹⁰

Sheryl’s stance concerning the role of editor suggested a genuine concern for the authenticity of women’s words. Irwin makes the important point that the newsletter sought to give agency to its amateur writers in an effort to remain unbiased towards its contributors.

The first newsletter published for Womonspace dates June 5, 1982. The two-page sheet described the purpose of the organization and its origins: “Its purpose is to see that there are ways

⁹Ibid 3.

¹⁰ NLPC, Maureen Irwin, Interview by Noelle Lucas, 4 June 1999.

for lesbians to get together, to get to know each other and to have a chance to socialize.” And that is exactly what the group set out to do. The newsletter served as a means to gather lesbians together. The first few issues outlined the objectives of the new group and advertised the few happenings in the area.

A group composed of members of the executive and general membership urged everyone to get involved with the direction of Womonspace and its activities. One year after organizing and becoming a society, *Womonspace News* was a reality. Social activities broadened seemingly overnight. Besides the monthly dance, the organization arranged a weekly gym night, a self-defense class, a baseball team, and plans for camping trips, game nights, and ski trips.

The “Coming Events” column listed events from other organizations. For instance, the Metropolitan Community Church [MCC], one of the few religious establishments to welcome lesbians and gay men into their midst, was frequently mentioned. According to Maureen Irwin, the MCC first met in 1978 at the offices of GATE and later moved to the Unitarian Church Building it rented for Sunday services.¹¹ “Coming Events” also typically listed GATE meetings, lesbian conferences, workshops, and leisure events.

The early editions of the newsletter consisted of editorial space and a short column called “Showcase: Venus of the Month” profiling one or two dedicated members of the group. The first issue paid tribute to Joan and Ann for organizing and co-ordinating the dances. A second column “Food for Thought” focused on social or cultural concerns of lesbians. One particularly interesting column compared the social scene of Edmonton to that of Vancouver. “S” wrote:

¹¹ City of Edmonton Public Archives, Maureen Irwin, “A Partial Chronology of the Edmonton Lesbian/Gay History,” (1996):5 (File not sorted by #)

"The cultural differences between Vancouver and Edmonton are staggering! There's very few social places gay women can go I feel like I'm living in a social and cultural vacuum!"¹²

For lesbians coming into the community from larger centres, the prospects in Edmonton seemed bleak. But the regular list of activities put on by Womonspace attempted to fill that social void by providing a series of events from which to choose. Organizers encouraged lesbians to partake in wen-do workshops, dances, gym night, hay rides, and roller skating. Film nights also proved popular choices. In conjunction with the University of Alberta's women's centre, Womonspace put on the 1977 documentary *Word is Out*, featuring interviews with 26 lesbians and gay men from across the United States.

As well, the newsletter encouraged writers to submit poetry and short-fiction to the newsletter. A woman called Karen contributed a rather lengthy serial called "All of Us in Wonderland" which recounted a hilarious trip to San Francisco. Having graduated with a degree in Creative Writing, Karen joined the newsletter committee as a staff writer. The narrative is amusing as it positioned a couple of small town 'canucks' on an expedition to the heart of gay America. This was the first submission of fiction to the newsletter and appeared in seven episodes.

Here was an opportunity to open the forum for debate on such topics as pornography, disabled lesbians, lesbians and aging, and even books and movies of interest to the lesbian population. For instance, Debbie contributed articles of her own on the misconceptions some people have towards disabled lesbians. Catherine also wrote for the newsletter and continues to do so. Karin Kratz was a poet of some bearing. In 1980, a newsletter in Ontario published a work

¹² "S," "Food for Thought," *Womonspace News* 1, no.1 (Jan/Feb,1982): 3.

of hers entitled *Dawn, A Collection of Poems*. The newsletter included one of her feminist poems that focused on a self-reliant women capable of fixing her own car and disregarding traditional male attempts to assist her.

Hello sir-
 Yes, I'm female-
 Yes, I'm fixing my car
 No I don't need your help
 Nor your alcohol-
 No-sir-
 I don't find it strange that I can fix my own car.
 Yes I am attractive
 No, I don't agree that disqualifies me from
 knowledge about my car.
 Yes, it is work requiring some strength
 Yes, I am female-
 Now, excuse me--you're taking up my air.¹³

Kratz outlined her politics of self-sufficiency and her meaning of the term separatism. The emphasis on learning skills commonly thought to be male-oriented were common concerns of lesbians at this time. For instance, one of the first classes Womonspace offered taught self-defense. Others such as "Women in the Trades" encouraged women to go into nontraditional lines of employment. The whole concept of the organization propelled members to learn skills that promoted self-reliance and increase self-esteem.

Poetry appeared in nearly every issue; later issues reserved a section called the "Creative Corner" for this very purpose. Poems ranged from the anecdotal to the erotic. Some were reprints from other publications, while the vast majority came from submissions. While sexuality and eroticism were touched upon, the newsletter did not carry much of this kind of material. One

¹³ Karin Kratz, "Untitled poem," *Womonspace News* 1, no.2 (December, 1982): 2.

noteworthy exception was Karen's erotic poem "Finding the Flame"¹⁴ which expressed the sensual eroticism of sexual climax between two lovers with vivid allusions to water, scent, and taste. An unidentified poet captured a romantic mood in "Dreams,"¹⁵ while Gail's untitled poem brought fingers, thighs, and breast and the play of light and sound to express her sexual longing.¹⁶

However, in 1983 *Womonspace News* included a reprint of *Lesbian Sexuality* by Susan Harris. Harris gave an account of the sexual practices of some gay men such as cruise bars, steam baths, and anonymous sex in parks and on beaches. Lesbians, according to Harris, desire a more intimate, nurturing sexual experience.¹⁷ She suggested that the pornography industry that perverted lesbian sexuality was responsible for a potential split in the gay community. Harris argued that gay men were oblivious to the subjugation of lesbians since their sexual activity was based in male power and lacking in emotional substance. Once more, Jean Noble contended that lesbians owed their allegiance primarily to women's rights issues over gay rights since gay men shared in the same male privilege allotted to all men regardless of orientation.

On a different note, Barb MacIntosh's *Lesbiantics* featured in a 1983 edition argued that monogamous relationships were a heterosexual byproduct and lesbians should seriously consider non-monogamous sexual practices. She contended that lesbians were conforming to pressures from the "straight world" and needed to redefine their own ways of looking at relationships,

¹⁴ Karen, "Finding The Flame," *Womonspace News* 3, no.8 (August,1985):3.

¹⁵ Unknown, "Dreams," *Womonspace News* 2, no.6 (June,1984):11.

¹⁶ Gail, "Untitled," *Womonspace News* 1, no.5 (May,1983): 4.

¹⁷ Susan Harris, "Lesbian Sexuality," *Womonspace News* 1, no.10 (October,1983): 4.

friendships, love, and sex.¹⁸ The writer was not promoting free sexual practice so much as the right to reject traditional ideas of marriage and family, represented by monogamy. Curiously, no letters to the editor commented on MacIntosh's standpoint. Views such as hers were an exception in the newsletter since the majority of submissions idealized finding that one special person for companionship. Later editions provided information on safe sexual practices, pointing out that lesbians were at low risk for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The newsletter's editorials and letters to the editor contained more engrossing issues facing Edmonton lesbians. One of the most controversial debates waged by the newsletter had to do with pornography and having strippers at the dances. The April 1983 issue of *Womonspace News* addressed this situation in a lengthy letter to the editors. Pauline wrote:

Here is an issue [pornography and strippers] which, I believe has the potential to create many hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and obvious split in lesbian community. . . . I am a woman, mother, nurse, lesbian, lover, feminist, friend, etc. However labels over-simplify us and are used against us, they are also necessary to expedient communication. I label myself a feminist/lesbian or lesbian/feminist. I'm not picky, neither comes first. Both are intricately intertwined.¹⁹

An exacting split in the community never occurred because strippers never did appear at a Womonspace dance. All the same Pauline referred to the 1981 National Film Board NFB presentation of *Not A Love Story* which made a clear connection between the multi-million dollar business of pornography and violence against women. Coincidentally, this film depicted the exploration of two women, a female stripper, Linda Lee Tracey and the director of the film, Bonnie Klein into the world of peep shows, strip joints, and other forms of pornography. While it

¹⁸ Barb MacIntosh, "Lesbiantics," *Womonspace News* 1, no.11 (November,1983): 8.

¹⁹ Pauline, "Letter to the Editors: On the Question of Having Strippers At Our Dances," *Womonspace News* 1, no.4 (April,1983): 2.

was true that the issue of violence against women remained a central focal point of second wave feminism, Pauline suggested that the politics of feminists were violated when lesbians chose to hire strippers. She put it this way: "Because being in a place where a women provides entertainment for other women by stripping doesn't make me feel good about myself. I would not find it cute, innocent, tantalizing or exciting."²⁰

A poll taken by Womonspace showed 60% of the membership were against such an event. While 40% of the membership supported strippers as merely entertainment for an exclusively female audience. However, the newsletter made no mention of support of such a position. The relatively high percentage that saw no reason not to have strippers at the dances may have been non-feminist lesbians or lesbians not convinced of arguments waged by Pauline and other members of the organization. In any case, the predominant feeling among the membership was that strippers exploited female sexuality regardless of the gender of the audience. Those who supported female entertainment saw it as an appreciation of the female body. Those who were against strippers felt it furthered the oppression of women.

In the end, the board ruled that since the Roost and Flashback occasionally featured strippers for women, women who wanted that form of entertainment could obtain it there.²¹ By and large, the group protected its social image by limiting certain types of activities to rather unobjectionable forms. These women did not want any notoriety and thus chose to tone-down contentious issues to preserve a social image. While the organization understated its politics, it nonetheless raised feminist arguments when it was judicious to do so. In this way, Womonspace

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ NLPC, Lynn, Personal E-mail, Lynn to Noelle Lucas, 1 May 2000.

thought it could attract more members.

For instance, pornography, oppression of women, and violence raised considerable dialogue in *Womonspace News*. A conference held in May 1983 called "Ending the Silence" raised the issue of homophobia as violence against women. In all, a total of thirty lesbian participants attended two workshops. Edmonton hosted the conference that drew a total of 300 women from across Canada. The keynote speaker was author and lesbian-feminist Kate Millet who is best known for her book *Sexual Politics*. Coreen Douglas provided a review of the conference:

We [participants] discussed the personal experiences of coping as lesbians in a society that denies our existence. We discussed the repercussions of coming out to family, friends, or on the job. We discussed how to replace self-oppression with self-esteem, pride and joy in who we are. A lot of attention was paid to the hazards and rewards of participating in male gay organizations in feminist groups, where lesbians are the minority. We even discussed the problems of working in lesbian organizations that are not necessarily feminist in character.²²

Womonspace exhibited little agreement on just how feminist in scope its organization should be.

One of the most vocal supporters of the women's rights campaign was Jean (Leggett) Noble. She frequently aired her views in the editorial section beginning in the early 1980s.

Pornography was the central theme of the March 1984 issue. An article written by Jean Noble reviewed the Canadian Coalition Against Media Pornography and suggested the local gay bar intent on hiring "Miss Nude Edmonton" better take note. The coalition was a national organization formed in response to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) task force. Noble wrote a disarming essay describing a multi-million dollar industry that legitimized the sale of soft pornography to one type of market while advancing a

²² Coreen Douglas, "Food for Thought: Ending the Silence," *Womonspace News* 1, no. 7 (July, 1983): 5.

hard core underground market to another. She argued that women and children were victims of the type of violence that led purveyors of pornography into such criminalized behaviour as child molestation and child prostitution. To underline her position, she suggested that lesbians who choose to watch strippers at gay clubs were contributing to sordid male fantasies that degraded women in skin magazines.

After seeing *Not a Love Story*, "C.P.H" reviewed her former association with pornographic magazines. Previously she purchased the occasional Playboy or Penthouse purely for personal pleasure. Her partner never took part in this activity and advised her to see the film. After viewing the graphic scenes, she revised her previous position:

My view has taken a complete turn around. There were scenes of womyn in bondage hanging upside-down, of womyn with gags, of womyn being beaten, there was even a picture from the cover of a magazine that showed a naked womyn going through a meat grinder and coming out hamburger. Is this supposed to be showing the real us? To me it's just another way the male has of trying to show us he's in complete control of us.²³

Expressing her rage C.P.H exclaimed: "I'm a womyn not an actress in someone's pornographic fantasies, and I refuse to be treated as such."²⁴ Feminists saw explicit sexual representations of women become increasingly violent.

Likewise, Jeanne Peneault offered her views on a panel discussion on pornography held in Edmonton. Prominent lesbian writer Chris Bearchell of the *Body Politic* took an unpopular anti-censorship position to Edmonton's Coreen Douglas and Mair Smith's anti-pornography stance. Bearchell suggested that sex industry workers were not forced to work in the industry and were

²³ C.P.H, "Another For the Fight," *Womonspace News* 2, no.6 (June,1984): 5.

²⁴ Ibid.

not victims of violence.²⁵ In other words, sex workers chose to enter the pornographic industry. Bearchell was quick to receive criticism, while not one letter appeared in support of her views. A number of years later many lesbians and lesbian-feminists would side with Bearchell's position as demonstrated by Vancouver's Little Sister's Art and Book Emporium's challenge against the seizure of gay magazines by Canada Customs. In its appeal, Little Sister's contested the constitutionality of customs censorship.²⁶

Still, many lesbians were actively engaged in anti-pornography activity. These women favoured government sanctions on the circulation of eroticism and pornography to protect women and children from violence, sexual harassment, and male dominance. Lesbian-feminist's drew comparisons between the distribution of pornography to that of homophobic and racist hate literature. Others saw censorship as giving more power to the state and right-wing moralists groups. But, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, most women's organizations provided support agencies and referral services to an array of women's issues blamed on pornography. They also sponsored educational workshops, self-defense classes, and forums to discuss the sexualization of women's bodies by advertisers and mass marketers.

Though the organization maintained that feminists were in the minority at Womonspace, lesbian feminist politics received a high profile between 1983 and 1985 primarily from the editorials provided by Jean Noble. Noble took the organization to task for its lack of commitment to feminism. As a result, Noble's editorials caused contention with members who did not support

²⁵ Jeanne Peneault, "Dear Womonspace," *Womonspace News* 2, no.8 (August, 1984): 2.

²⁶ See Janine Fuller and Stuart Blackley's *Restricted Entry: Censorship on Trial* (Vancouver: The Press Gang Publishers, 1995).

her views. According to her:

The originators of Womonspace saw a need for womyn-only dances and they took the initiative to fill that need. But that is not the beginning or the end of it all. Womonspace is not a feminist organization, nor does it profess to be. It is important, however, to consider the political implications of organizing around an issue such as lesbianism.²⁷

She argued that the primary oppression of lesbians was that of being women and that

Womonspace as an organization failed to account for the oppression of all women regardless of orientation.

Furthermore she admonished Womonspace to recognize the political implications incurred by insulating themselves from the struggles of feminists concerning pornography, violence, and reproductive rights. Noble typecasted the organization as essentially right-wing:

Does lesbian-feminism have a place in Womonspace and if so, how do we define 'lesbian-feminism? If not, can a lesbian-feminist work within a right-wing organization that 1) refuses to recognize the politicalness of its actions, and 2) that won't or cannot see how issues of violence against womyn and children, pornography, sexual harassment, sexual violence within the home and on the street, affect our lives as lesbians as much as our lives as womyn?

Understandably, Noble's criticism of the organization led to a barrage of letters. Members of the Public Relations Directions Committee, for instance, took issue:

A basic issue here seems to be the need for traditional labels to be applied, and for our activities to take the form of those traditionally labeled political. If one accepts that premise, then one can accept your stance that Womonspace is indeed not political. We do not feel the need for denying the political impact of these actions simply because they were not given the label of political from the outset.

The committee listed activities it considered to be political including workshops put on by

Womonspace to discuss lesbian sexuality, legal issues in lesbian relationships, membership on the

²⁷ Jean Noble, "Editorial," *Womonspace News* 2, no.6 (June,1984): 3.

GALA steering committee, participation in International Women's Day, and monthly lesbianism/feminism discussion groups. Perhaps members sensed that radical feminists like Jean failed to recognize other less radical forms of feminism operating within the organization.

Clearly, differences occurred concerning the objectives of the organization and how members defined themselves in relation to feminist politics. In her final editorial, Noble discussed the oppressive institutions of heterosexuality and patriarchal religious organizations. In this article, Noble linked reproductive measures taken by the Catholic church to heterosexism and the oppression of lesbians. Because lesbians lived outside the social ideal of the nuclear family, lesbianism was disparaged by institutions representing heterosexuality. In a final note, Noble expressed her political views:

My involvement with this newsletter has been very valuable to me. It has helped me to better understand and prioritize my commitments; I am a womyn and a feminist first, a lesbian second, and I truly believe that when the violence against us as womyn ends, so will the violence against us as lesbians. I feel it is impossible to separate struggles into lesbian and non-lesbian And I cannot isolate myself and my energies solely within any one of those struggles. As I said earlier, my experience within Womonspace has been very valuable and useful for me, but I feel it is time to move on.²⁸

In response, Bev reminded readers of the organizations objectives to reach as many women as possible.

Feminism and lesbianism are, contrary to your statements, quite separable. One can be a lesbian and not a feminist. Furthermore, even the lesbian who is a feminist, as is the case with myself, can and does maintain both as separate parts of their own identity. Lesbianism is the expression of one's lifestyle and sexual preference, whereas feminism is one's ideological beliefs. Womonspace, as with all lesbian organizations, should provide the opportunities for expressing the former in a supportive environment. Ideally, it should also provide activities which are directed toward the latter for those womyn who wish to

²⁸ Jean Noble, "Editorial: If One is Cheated, We All Suffer!" *Womonspace News* 2, no.7 (July, 1984):3.

participate. First and foremost, however, it is a lesbian organization which must see that this need is filled first as this is the primary bond which draws such a diversity of womyn together.²⁹

Although Womonspace offered a number of avenues for politically-minded members, Bev maintained the organization owed its first consideration to lesbianism and the social bonds made there.

Furthermore, as Agathe Gaulin made clear, Womonspace started out to broaden social, not political, activities for Edmonton lesbians:

Womonspace's activities and programs are not dictated by some holy writ. They are conceived and acted upon by lesbian womyn who have decided to spare some of their time for the good of other lesbians. No one political idea is pushed upon anyone. I have never witnessed such a diverse group of persons working together: conservatives, radicals, feminists, traditionalists, closet cases, clubbies, mothers, older lesbians, professionals, students, and yes, even posties.³⁰

Gaulin maintained that there was room at Womonspace for all points of views as long as no one position overrode another. The organization presented the most practical means to ensure the support of the highest percentage of members.

Womonspace editorials thoroughly discussed issues such as sexual harassment on the job, inadequate funding of Women's resource services, and the power of patriarchal structures to deny women the same rights as men. Discussions concerning homophobia, lesbian identity, visibility, and lesbian pride were typical of later themes. Internalized homophobia, wrote Terri Yeske, constituted half the battle. Oppression, she argued, was as much self-imposed as it was imposed

²⁹ Bev, "Letter to the Editor." *Womonspace News* 2, no. 7 (July, 1984): 6.

³⁰ Agathe Gaulin, "Editorial-Guest Editorial," *Womonspace News* 2, no. 9 (September, 1984): 2.

upon by outside forces.³¹

Problems associated with local Edmonton clubs resulted in a rebuttal sent to *The Edmonton Journal* concerning an article on lesbian bar patrons. An open letter to Boots 'N Saddles manager, Conrad expressed the outrage many lesbians felt concerning the stereotyping of lesbians in the clubs. According to the article, Conrad was quoted as saying: "Rather than have them [lesbians] destroy the place, we [management] locked them out." In reaction, Coreen Douglas and Kathy Conrad, no relation to the manager, wrote:

And what do we find in the article? One of the most outrageous stereotypes of gay women ever dreamed up, put forward by one of our gay 'brothers.' We find the perpetuation of the myth that lesbians are emotionally crippled, tough 'bulldikes', always picking for a fight. Can't trust those lesbians you know!³²

This is not to deny that the combination of an emotionally-charged atmosphere, mixed with liberal amounts of alcohol did not result in some women, and even, some men creating problems in the bars. Douglas and Baker agreed these particular individuals should be banned. But, excluding all women was blatant discrimination and demonstrated sexism on the part of management. Under these circumstances, they advocated a boycott of the club. The two women suggested that the real motive behind Conrad's actions was to maintain a men's only "cruise bar." The actions of the Boots 'N Saddles manager enraged the lesbian community.

On the other hand, Flashback held an open forum to stimulate lagging lesbian interest in the club. One of the problems was that the bar was not a private club, or a gay club but a mixed

³¹ Terry Yeske, "Editorial: The Name of the Game," *Womonspace News* 3, no.3 (March, 1985): 2.

³² Coreen Douglas and Kathy Conrad, "Letter to the Editors: Open Letter to Boots N' Saddles," *Womonspace News* 1, no. 7 (July, 1983): 2.

club with a large straight clientele.³³ The club set aside Tuesday nights for women which proved an undesirable time frame for most. Some suggestions proposed holding Womonspace functions and coffee houses at Flashback. Other suggestions included live concerts, female drag shows, and strippers. Strippers remained a controversial topic among the women in attendance. The possibility of having a women's night on a weekend was the preferred solution. In response to the meeting, the membership set up a committee to mediate between Flashback and members of Womonspace. As it turned out, the management did not think it was fair to other patrons to hold a women's only night on Friday. Ironically, a few months later Flashback designated Friday night as men's only night.³⁴

In a similar situation, Mary T. Hughes, vice-president of Womonspace, 1984, reported on her less than gratifying visit to "Steppin' Out." Not only was the service poor but that club charged her different prices each time she ordered the same drink. A year after the Boots n' Saddle episode, the bar once again permitted women but only if they were signed in as guest. Hughes wrote: "I think it's sad that women continue to frequent these places where we are treated so poorly. But what is our alternative?"³⁵ She noted that after Womonspace held a general meeting in her absence, it decided to lend its name to dances held at Steppin' Out, a move which Hughes strongly objected:

One of my understandings of Womonspace is that it was formed to provide an alternative

³³ Unknown, "Flash Meets With Women," *Womonspace News* 1, no. 10 (October, 1983): 3-4.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mary T. Hughes, "Staying Out of Steppin' Out," *Womonspace News* 2, no. 7 (July, 1984): 12.

to the club scene. Why is our name being lent to a profitable, private, male-owned business? . . . I feel the soul of Womonspace has been bought by private enterprise. In writing this, I'm hoping to appeal to your political consciousness to join me in boycotting Steppin' Out and the Womonspace dances there.³⁶

Clearly, some lesbians attending the gay bars and clubs felt slighted by sexist management who limited their access to the bars, charged them different admission prices, and perpetuated attitudes or negative treatment of lesbians.

Whether Womonspace had anything to gain from its endorsement of Steppin' Out is dubious. However, the organization had few of the financial difficulties other organizations of a similar nature had. The dances represented one of the most profitable ventures of the group and continued to sustain the organization as a whole. Womonspace set aside money for grants to individuals interested in promoting lesbian culture, suggesting that the organization was financially sound despite setbacks over the years.

The social and cultural goals of the group were numerous. At one point, a single woman, Jude, undertook a "national lesbian tour" over a period of time. The tour did not seem to provide any tangible long-term outcomes. However, reports on it made for interesting reading.

Womonspace provided a grant to finance the tour. In the summer of 1985, Jude traveled across Canada meeting lesbians from British Columbia to Nova Scotia. She began by writing letters and making phone calls to lesbians she knew in various communities and relied on word of mouth to find others. Her goal was to locate women in small and isolated areas. Jude's plans included distributing letters, pamphlets, and cards from members of the organization as well as flyers advertising cultural events across the prairies. A typical excerpt of her journey reads:

³⁶ Ibid.

It was always a bit strange and slow at first when I got to a place, tired and spaced out after driving all day; I'd phone someone I didn't know and start from there. But it usually picked up and was fine as long as I was patient. We spent an afternoon sitting on a rock talking about things far and near; I gradually came to feel that I'd somehow happened on a center of great power. This was near the end of August, in northern Ontario. The sun was warm, and the talk and the spirit were warm. We spoke of isolation, of the network that joins all of us; how we find each other where ever we travel— and the words don't convey all there was.³⁷

The newsletter offered advice to rural lesbians in "Small Town Lesbians Go West."

The difficulties experienced by lesbians with no direct access to a social community was considerable compared to that of city dwellers. Putting an advertisement in a local paper for a potluck and including a box office number opened up a social network for "LAR" who was living outside of Picton, a small town near Kingston, Ontario. She later moved to Edmonton and took part in *Womonspace* functions. To the amusement of her readers, LAR wrote:

Once people found out about me through our vocal sisters, they began to park out in front of our house to see what I looked like. A real lesbian in Picton! (What they didn't know was that there were many of us).³⁸

Rural lesbians found creative ways of meeting each other. Sheer loneliness and isolation caused many of them to commute long distances to larger centres in order to find needed support.

Womonspace reached out to women outside of Edmonton to address the particular concerns of rural residents.

Subsequent issues tackled by *Womonspace News* included aging, coming-out after forty and lesbians with disabilities. Lesbian cultural events, such as music festivals, workshops and book reviews received wide coverage in the newsletter. In later issues, a section called "Between the

³⁷ Jude, "National Lesbo Tour," *Womonspace News* 3, no. 9 (September, 1985):1.

³⁸ LAR, "Small Town Lesbians Go West," *Womonspace News* 4, no. 12 (December, 1986):

Covers" featured critiques of lesbian fiction and non-fiction. Another column "Splinters from the Board" listed upcoming events and sometimes covered information concerning general meetings. The newsletter provided information on lesbian custody issues, gay rights legislation, and news that directly concerned the gay and lesbian population. Issues prior to 1990 did not mention lesbians of colour. Later on, Jackie, a lesbian of aboriginal heritage, narrated stories of women of the north in a metaphorical and spiritual style of prose.

As Laura Lee cautioned in her article "How We Deal With Our Differences," lesbians were not a homogenous group. Lee argued that how the organization dealt with its differences determined the quality of experiences and relationships within.

I really enjoy working in Womonspace. I need to say all these things because I have seen the incredible cost that badly-handled conflict has had in several other groups. People and organizations have been severely damaged for years, over things that started as small irritations. Impatience leading to heavy-handedness and ass-kicking, totally forgetting the reason the group was together in the first place. God, I don't want to go through any of those things again! I see Womonspace's main function as community-building. We must remember this when we are doing all those short-term tasks, especially when we start getting impatient or angry with each other. Community-building is never an 'add water and stir' process, but must be by definition a long-term, bit by bit process.³⁹

Lee pointed out one of the greatest challenges facing Womonspace was to accommodate the diversity of the lesbian community. The history of *Womonspace News* demonstrates the breadth and depth of opinions waged by writers and editorialists. Submissions and editorials covered both political and social concerns. However, the most effective outcome of the newsletter was to bring knowledge of the lesbian community to women throughout the Edmonton-area.

³⁹ Laura Lee, "How We Deal With Our Differences," *Womonspace News* 2, no.6 (June, 1984): 6.

CONCLUSION

WOMONSPACE: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SPACE TO LESBIAN COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Through the formation of Womonspace, Edmonton lesbians sought to transform their social life, their identities, and relationships by centralizing social and recreational activities into a single organization. The group set out to be “all things social to all gay women” and did so by providing a series of social functions. This aspect of the organization proved most successful and increased the visibility of Edmonton’s dispersed lesbian community. Of course, Womonspace fell short of meeting “all” social needs. Nonetheless, the group provided an alternative to more established organizations and focused in as much as it could on forming lesbian bonds within the community.

The organization set out to create a positive self-image of lesbians that involved self-reliance, independence, and organizational skills. These needs were not met at GATE nor at other predominantly gay male organizations or clubs. Womonspace founders sought a safe sociable space set apart but not divorced from the rest of the community. They believed that by having one central meeting place Edmonton’s lesbian population would converge. Soon word would spread to closeted lesbians that Womonspace did not pressure its members to identify themselves publicly or politically with the gay community. Womonspace appealed to lesbians who eagerly sought to enhance their social lives and those exasperated by other options available to them. In turn, Womonspace built community by gaining the support of non-political, non-radical women who

would have remained isolated from the lesbian community if such an option were not available to them. The social needs of lesbians called for a respite from sexist attitudes.

There were two levels of sexism in the gay community. First, lesbians deemed established organizations such as GATE indifferent to their concerns. Secondly, lesbians experienced differential treatment at bars and clubs. Oral sources describe both settings as “uncomfortable,” resulting in some tension between gay men and women. Obviously, responses vary and some women were more sensitive to mixed settings than others. However, the founders of Womonspace specified sexism as one of the central motives for starting a woman’s group.

Providing a safe place for lesbians to socialize contributes to greater group bonds and increased self-esteem. Thus, it is plausible to argue that the social aspects of lesbian identity formation and the perceived difference of like-minded women stabilize group identity bonds. Womonspace succeeded in raising a lesbian consciousness in the Edmonton area. Closeted lesbians sought a relatively insulated space in which to socialize at some level. To ensure safety of individuals, organizers attempted to downplay political and feminist issues. Nonetheless, participants in this study elucidated an ongoing struggle between political and nonpolitical members. Sometimes issues resulted in the curtailment of the needs of politically minded individuals in order to maintain the comfort and privacy of others.

To avoid public scrutiny, the organization invoked the social mandate and its implied apolitical position as a defense mechanism against radical lesbian-feminist viewpoints. Social activism was fine and appropriate for those who wished to do so, and social activism at Womonspace was permissible within reasonable bounds. However, the kind of activism that brought undue attention to members was unacceptable. The very politically active could join

GALA and the civil rights committee. Many Womonspace members did join GALA, including Jean Noble, Maureen Irwin, and Liz Massiah. Though Womonspace maintained it was not political, the organization facilitated the political inclinations of some of its members.

Ironically, the backlash of letters aimed at Jean Noble identified acceptable forms of feminist activities. Clearly, the group was concerned with maintaining a certain image of the organization and by downplaying radical feminist viewpoints to ensure a positive, nonpartisan impression to prospective members. For instance, founders of the group chose not to enforce a code of dress, values, or politics on the general membership. Building community means appealing to the highest number of people. An image of radical lesbian-feminism is linked to an analysis of male violence and tends to position lesbians as separatists. Individualism, on the other hand, considers the social and cultural aspects of identity formation. In other words, building community necessitates steering away from radical causes.

Debates concerning feminism, pornography, and violence provided a continuous flow of discussion throughout the 1980s. Obviously, sending representatives to NAC and showing support for International Women's Day constituted political actions. Now and then, fear of radical labels caused the organization to repudiate the political nature of various events. Instead, the group chose to see these activities in the context of social organizing. Though "non-political," Womonspace sought to influence public policy and compete for public credibility. Hence, the organization's social stance served a political purpose. At the same time, the repeal of a political stance resulted in a fundamental source of strife in the organization. In spite of everything, Womonspace adhered to the social mandate fearing that closeted members would turn away from the organization. For example, the expulsions of Liz and Jackie occurred because these two did

not “harmonize” with the overall objectives of the group to remain discreet.

Womonspace objective was to hold easygoing, casual social functions, not to agitate its members into performing political feats. This feature of the organization appealed to a large portion of the lesbian population who led inconspicuous lives detached from the lesbian community. Womonspace offered these women an opportunity to share their lesbian identity within the confines of the group. Many lesbians were not “out” to their families or employers and feared social, economic or physical repercussions. In general, lesbians like Maureen chose Womonspace functions because they did not fit into the bar scene or just preferred not to socialize in such unpredictable settings.

Oftentimes, lesbians came to Womonspace because the organization provided social outlets not found elsewhere in the community. As a group, these women were intelligent, capable, and socially responsible, not to mention astute organizers. Some women were attracted to the structure of the meeting place and knowing what to expect from an evening out. The bars often did not offer this type of assurance or provide for the safety of lesbian clientele. Indeed, Womonspace undertook precautionary measures to safeguard members.

According to the oral interviews, Womonspace academic and feminist groups viewed dances with low regard. Clearly, the organization may have appeared cliquish to some lesbians in other groups. For instance, the tendency to idealize the organization’s social successes and to bypass any analysis or criticism aimed at the organization by feminist groups and former members was evident throughout the interviews. Instead, the recollections pointed to a perceived opposition from others, most likely a result of idealism and defensiveness. Consequently, members felt misunderstood, and undervalued by academic and politicized lesbians. However, an accurate

assessment of the actual relationship between Womonspace members and other lesbian/feminist groups is difficult to determine.

In smaller centres, where few opportunities existed for narrowly focused groups, a broader social mandate allows for more optimal effect. By having a non-political emphasis, Womonspace, like GATE before it, succeeded in attracting more people for its meetings and events. This policy proved useful as not all gays and lesbians felt unduly called to participate in groups that operate mainly for political reasons. Nevertheless, the notion of “politics” varies and Womonspace chose to see educational services, lesbian/feminist discussion groups, and community outreach as primarily exercising a social function. A social focus permitted greater latitude and inspired diverse points of views.

Womonspace identified itself as essentially “apolitical.” Such a stance suggests the group narrowly defined political action on the basis of radical public activism such as those involving media attention. Attempts made by Jean Noble to insert a political dialogue into the newsletter indicate a political component. In any event, Womonspace activities minimized public attention and avoided political labeling of their activities. Another organization might very well see these same educational and social activities differently. For Womonspace, the totality of all events, social and otherwise, resulted in a toned down overall political outcome. As it was, many women came out publicly, who might not have otherwise, because of the support offered by Womonspace.

The social connections made by the members resulted in changes to the lesbian community. These women increased the formation of community bonds by advancing the social interests of lesbians. For Womonspace organizers, the importance of securing a “safe” space

served two purposes. One, it combated sexism in the gay community and, two, it gained the confidence of closeted women. Women who feared societal repercussions because of their lesbianism were more likely to attend meetings in an exclusively female space. In addition, self-identified lesbians were likely to gain access to a wider variety of social and recreational activities and foster greater social bonds through their participation in a separate women's organization. All the same, "out" lesbians were free to attend both mixed groups as well as Womonspace.

This thesis argues that the appropriation of social space stimulates political progress. The goal of social change makes Womonspace political. The founders of Womonspace understood that access to social space for non-political activities enhances lesbian visibility and promotes political awareness. Greater visibility strengthens cultural awareness to gay and lesbian issues. Though most lesbians do not join social groups for political reasons, the politics of organizing may emerge from a social source. However, ideological disagreements do take place and may result in conflict. Thus, an awareness of cultural and social difference is paramount to adapting to the needs of a changing lesbian population. Clearly, the social versus political basis of organizing are not wholly detached. For instance, some members feel that identifying as a member of a collective alone changes the shape of their community and causes a political outcome.

Activism prior to the emergence of Womonspace increased the awareness of gay and lesbian rights issues. In turn, activism enabled the formation of cultural outlets, gay rights organizations, and social clubs. In Western Canada, these groups slowly developed a series of social networks to increase awareness of gay and lesbian culture. Edmonton's lesbian community saw the development of writings, music, art, poetry, and discussion groups. In addition, Womonspace stimulated social growth, recreational outlets, and educational resources for

lesbians. Such activities created a sense of belonging and led to greater social bonds.

The difficulties of establishing a long-lasting lesbian organization are tested by outspoken members. Any deviation from the general objectives of the organization could result in fewer members. The founders of Womonspace established bylaws to emphasize building community, the key to this objective resting upon the availability of social outlets. At Womonspace, lesbian-feminist ideologies resulted in some members identifying themselves as feminist first, and lesbians second. Most members, however, came to socialize, not to politicize. Even so, some of these same women expanded their social activism by joining other groups.

Despite its non-political injunction, Womonspace found ways to increase visibility, self-esteem, and community awareness without infringing on closeted members and members strove diligently to achieve these aims. Versatility in the organization provided lesbians with several options. For example, individuals attended dances without becoming members. Members, on the other hand, volunteered, attended general meetings, became board members or just "hung-out." The organization adapted to the needs of lesbians by relaxing expectations of its members. Consequently, more members joined and some extended their activities to include volunteer positions.

Nonetheless, social groups and community bonds may need to shift to integrate contemporary points of views, "older" lesbians on the board may be slow to incorporate these changes. All the same, Womonspace continues to thrive because of a strong organizational structure and a board that attempts to resolve internal disputes. That the organization managed to carry on despite a number of personal and financial setbacks suggests a number of possibilities. First, the social calendar of Womonspace continues to fulfill a vital role in the community.

Second, specific actions taken by board members maintained the social mandate. For instance, to preserve integrity, the board chose not to disclose legal problems incurred by the embezzlement case. Similarly, while the membership was aware of the expulsion issue, the board managed to gloss over particulars that could jeopardize the reputation of the organization. By viewing the situation as stemming from one or two individuals, Womonspace protected the majority of discreet and non-political members. Disputes were kept to a minimum. Discretion and when necessary, expulsion are effective ways of maintaining a sound, positive image.

Third, it is possible to argue that the organization narrowly defined what is meant by building community. Since most members were educated and Euro-Canadian, building community did not appear to include meeting the needs of diverse groups of lesbians. This is not to say Womonspace made a point of appealing to one group of people over another. However, the participants of my research were by and large professionals and semi-professionals including librarians, writers, artists, and civil servants. Similarly, content provided by the newsletter sidesteps issues and ideas from diverse cultural groups, although it cannot be claimed on the basis of this research that this trend is deliberate. In view of the group's aim to appeal to "all" gay women, Womonspace may eventually have to face this issue.

Womonspace differentiated itself from other gay and lesbian organizations in Edmonton by extending the social perimeters of the community. Oral sources claimed feminist involvement in the organization was minimal. By contrast, the newsletter carried extensive political and feminist commentary. Furthermore, some lesbians joined the lobbying group GALA after learning organizational skills at Womonspace. Whether as volunteers or board members, lesbians increased their social support. Though the mandate was never amended to include a political proclamation,

political activity did take place. The organizations commitment to the lesbian community went beyond the social. Still, Womonspace chose to prioritize social needs over political involvement. Safeguarding the privacy of closeted members called for a less public form of activism.

Generally speaking, lesbians on the prairies have not garnered a great deal of scholarly attention. Because gays and lesbians in larger metropolitan communities exert a greater presence, scholars addressed more vocal and visible groups first. Clearly, an incomplete picture has emerged. By examining lesbian culture in Edmonton, Alberta, this thesis expands knowledge of history of sexuality in Canada. Furthermore, Womonspace merits historical attention because it is a rare example of a separate lesbian organization that has successfully sustained itself considerably longer than most lesbian organizations of its era which disbanded because of political or financial complications.

Womonspace set out to approach long-term social change by actively pursuing a social focus. Operating as a focal group for the diverse interests of lesbians led to increased social spaces and resulted in a political outcome. An outgrowth of community building includes the availability of space made available for support groups ranging from lesbian mothers, lesbians with disabilities, lesbians of colour, bisexual and transgendered youth. In addition, social growth increased the number of "gay-friendly" and lesbian and gay owned and operated establishments, bookstores, and coffee shops. The founders of Womonspace chose this path and partially extended the public sphere necessary for constructing a visible lesbian community with the exception of acknowledging the diversity therein.

Like any other group, Womonspace faces an ongoing task of accommodating socio-cultural changes. In other words, success of the group is neither static nor finite. Much depends

on how the group monitors and accommodates changes in its environment. Obviously, the newsletter is a basic tool in this regard. All groups and organizations are subject to losing sight of original objectives. Unless Womonspace remains vigilant and adaptable, it too faces closure. Twenty years later, the gay and lesbian community has changed in ways that call for the organization to reexamine its policies to reflect the diverse cultural and social needs of a new generation.

APPENDIX I EXAMPLES FROM THE WOMONSPACE NEWSLETTER

The contents of this appendix illustrate some aspects of *Womonspace News*. This section includes: cover illustrations, advertisements, events calender and editorial inserts. My intent here is to give a sample of the range of material found in the newsletter and a general indication of style, appearance and overall presentation.

Figure 1. Example of Womonspace Newsletter cover page format popular in the 1980s
Womonspace News 1, no. 3 (October, 1983).

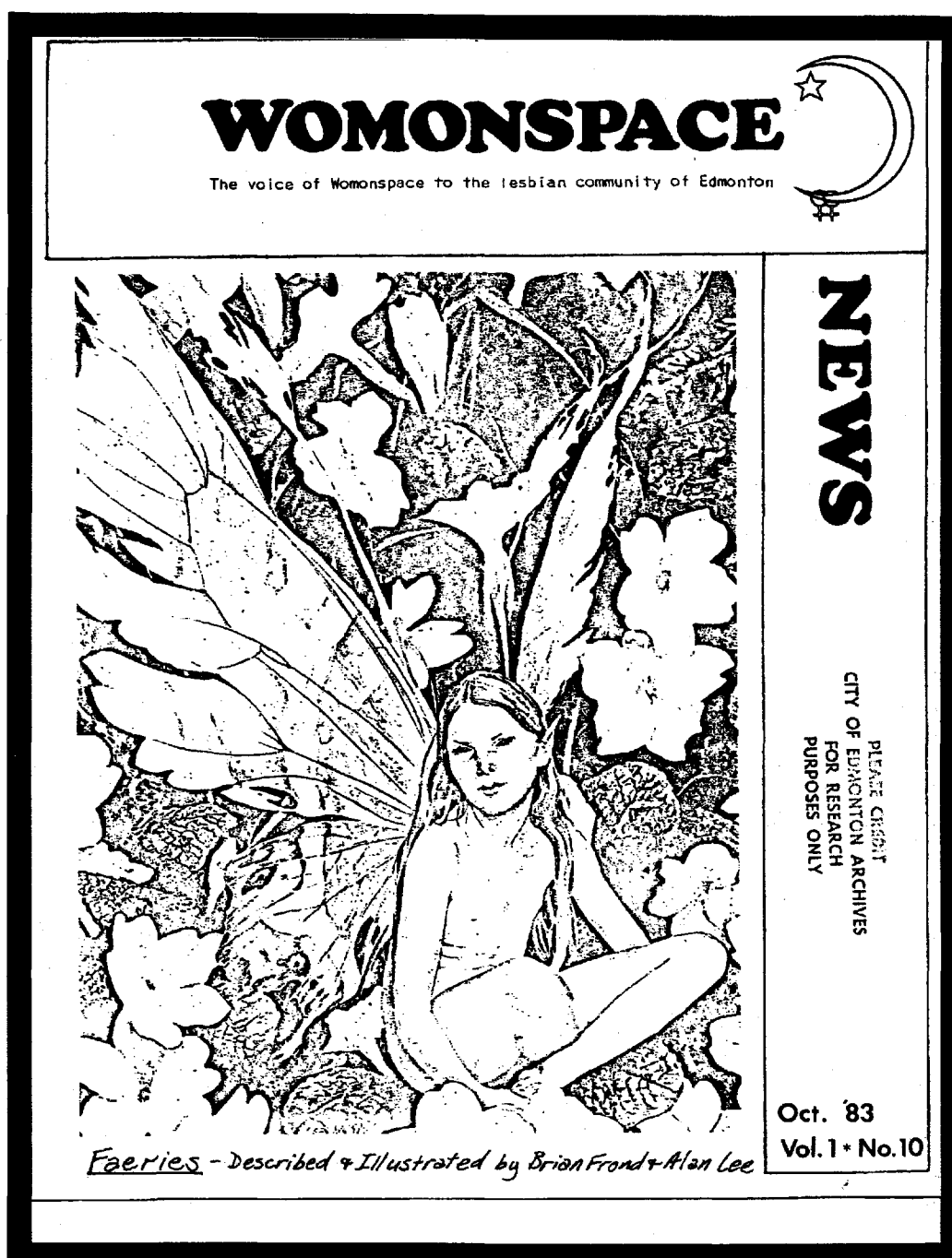


Figure 2. Early edition of Womonspace Newsletter stating the aims and structure of the organization. *Womonspace News* 1, no.1 (December, 1982).

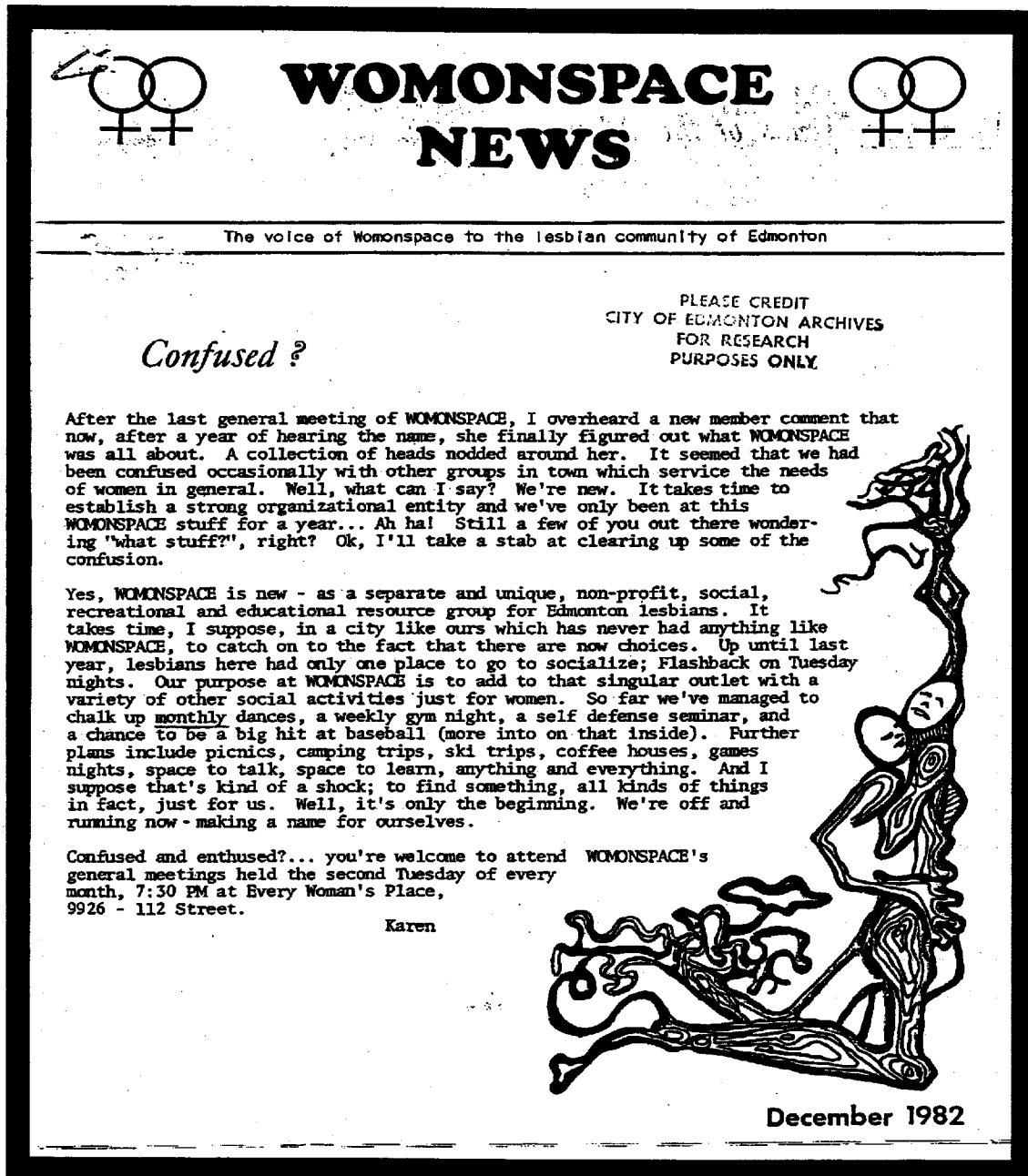


Figure 3. Example of a Women's only dance advertisement held at the Roost bar and social club *Womonspace News* 2, no.4 (April,1984).

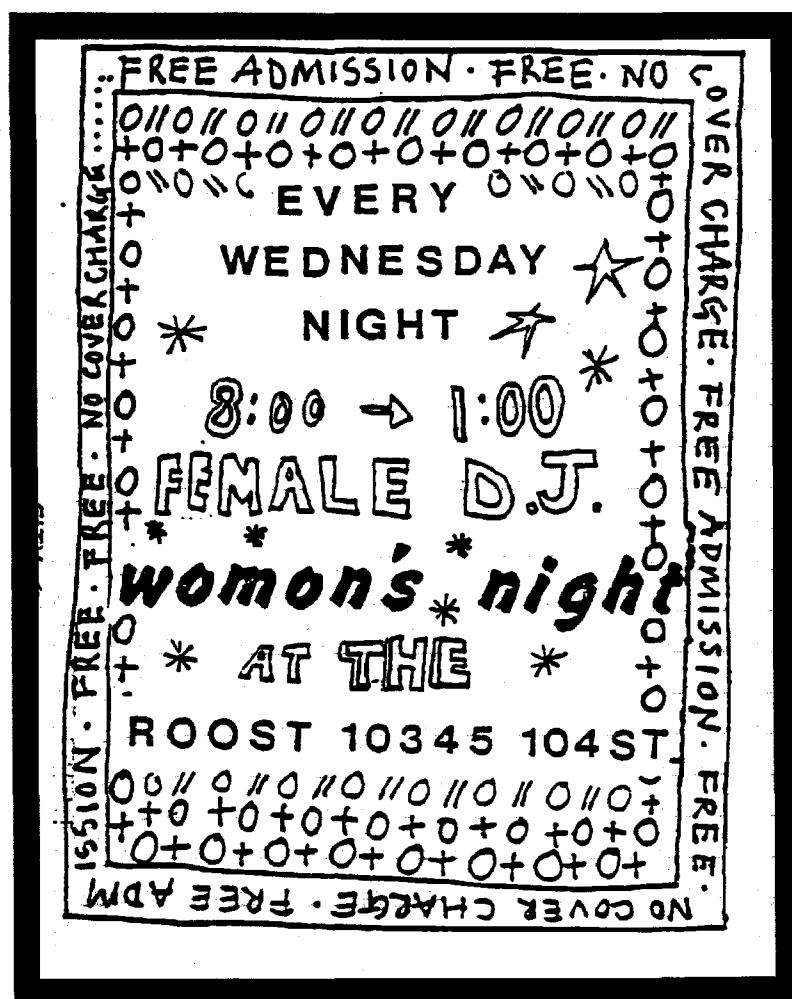



Figure 4. One of GATE's frequent advertisements found in *Womonspace News*. GATE appealed more to those lesbians involved in political and civil rights issues

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- SOCIAL EVENTS
- LIBRARY

FIGURE 5. Example of an events calender as regularly featured on the back page of the newsletter. Note the monthly dance and the general meeting. *Womonspace News*, 3, no.2 (January, 1985).

January

Activities -

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
		1	2	BRD MEETING 5:30 pm AGATHE'S 485-6332 3	4	5
6	PR MEETING 5:30 pm Jeanne P. 439-3301 7	GENERAL MEETING 7:30 pm E.W.P. 8	9	GALA CR MT'G LIZ 481-5973 10	SKATING! HAWRELAK 7 pm START 11	12
13	14	CR COMMITTEE MEETING 7:30 pm E.W.P. 15	16	17	18	DANCE! SAME PLACE 8:00 pm 19
20	21	22	DANCE MT'G 7:30 pm E.W.P. 23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

SKATING PARTY

Have some invigorating, old-fashioned fun at our skating party on January 11 at Hawrelak Park! Do you remember how much fun skating can be? Skate from 7-9 pm and then head over to warm and cozy Paul Kane House (10220-121 St.) for hot chocolate and hot dogs and laughter from 9-11 pm. For further info call Kathryn at 481-5973.

DANCE COORDINATORS & MUSIC MEETING

If you've ever coordinated anything at a dance, are interested in coordinating, or are just plain interested in helping establish some guidelines for the dances, and also contributing your feelings with regards to music, come to a meeting January 23, a Wednesday night, 7:30pm, at E.W.P. This is important. Mark it on your calendar now!

*The next Newsletter Meeting is Jan. 19, 8:00pm.
prior to the commencement of the dance!*

FIGURE 6. Very few advertisements appear in the newsletter. Most advertisements reflect the interests of Womonspace members. Business card size ads such as the ones shown here cost \$5.00. Classified advertisements up to 3 lines were free to members. *Womonspace News* 3, no.5 (June, 1985).

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Contact List: for Manitoba

Portage-la-Prairie: BI-women's Support Group (BWSG), Box 820, P-la-P, Mn., R1N 3C3.

Thompson: Gay Friends of Thompson, Box 157, Thompson, Mn., R8N 1N2.

Winnipeg: Lesbian Line (204) 786-8976 (Information Line), Gay Community Center, 277 Sherbrooke St., Winnipeg.

The Wishing Well: P.O. Box 117, Novato, Ca., U.S.A., 94948-0117.

7

EARN EXTRA CASH!

We are in need of a cleaning person for the final clean-up at Womonspace dances. This includes sweeping and mopping the floor, washing off and stacking tables, cleaning the bathrooms and taking out the garbage. That's about all there is to earning \$50.00 once a month. Equipment is provided. To apply, call Kathryn at 481-5973 or leave a message on the phone line; 488-2918.

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SILVER LINING

Silver Lining Productions is a group of women, interested in the promotion of women and men in music. They hope to be the stepping stone for many local musicians between the bar/club circuit and the major production and music companies. Their main focus is women in music and Albertan musicians.

CONTACT: Silver Lining Productions
c/o Julie M. Walker
2205 - 2 Ave. NW
Calgary, Alberta
T2N 0H1

G.A.T.E.

Wednesday nights are women's nights at the Gay Alliance Towards Equality office. Drop in at 10173 and 104 Street between 7 - 10 p.m. G.A.T.E. has a good library and peer counselling is also available.

FIGURE 7. Editors changed on a regular basis. Frequently, guest editorialist provided alternate points of view, variety in terms of subject matter, and style. *Womonspace News* 4, no.8 (September, 1986).

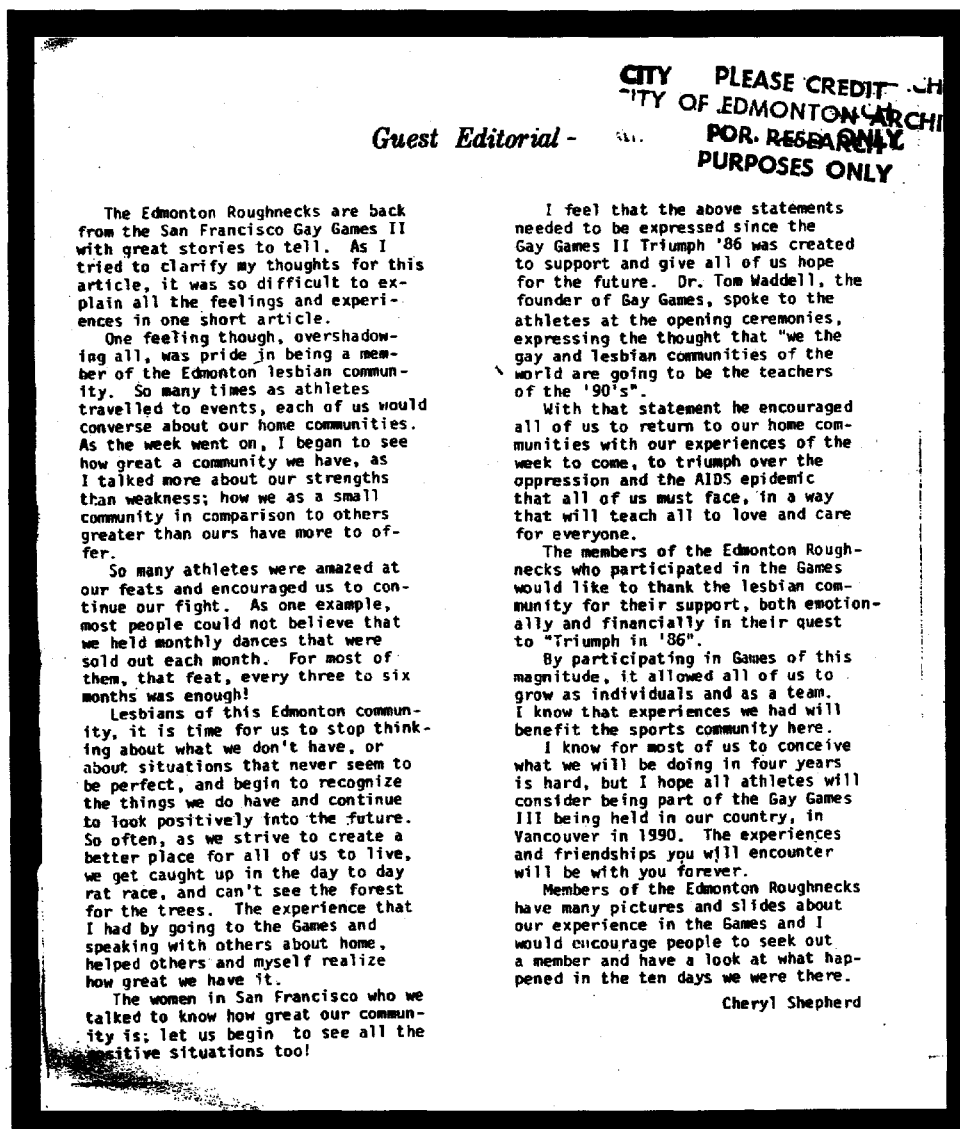



FIGURE 8. Examples of letters to the editor. Letters to the editor varied in terms of content, conviction, and complexity. *Womonspace News* 2, no.6 (June, 1984).



Letters to the Editor-

Womonspace Womyn -
(or maybe, dear editor:)


This is a good opportunity for me to do something which I've planned for a long time, but keep putting off, which is to write a supportive letter to the editor. Having been involved in many womyn's groups and communities over the years, from B.C. to N.B., I have much praise for Womonspace in particular, and the lesbian community as I have so far experienced it in Edmonton.

There is a cohesiveness and general support of each other that I've not found in other places, big or small. Political infighting seems to be minimal, if not almost non-existent. That in itself is something. Arriving in Edmonton from 3000 miles away, knowing not a soul, I have been given consistent support, acceptance and an enthusiastic reception. It may seem like simple things, but when it's not there, it can surely be alienating.

The WOMONSPACE NEWS is a treat. Do womyn here know how hard it is in other places to get something together that is half as good? I find Jean's editorials to be consistently astute, thought-provoking and well done.

So this is a vote of confidence from me to Womonspace and the lesbian community in Edmonton.

Love,
Jude



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CHOOSING TO HAVE A CHILD

When it seems the fetus has the complete control of my body, when I'm crying because the baby's demands are too many, and when I'm exhausted from lack of sleep, will I be sorry? Will I resent the years spent with the constant responsibility for another one's life? When money is tight and when it seems the whole world disapproves and when my child comes home in tears because Mom's a dyke, will I have regrets? And then when I'm facing my teenager's accusations of being deprived of a father, will I be strong enough?

I will find the strength. I will be a mother. The need fills my whole being - warmly, urgently, joyously. And I've waited long enough.

Lindy

APPENDIX II ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Following page features a copy of the article I sent to *Womonspace News* to engage the interest of members of Womonspace and the lesbian community to participate in an oral history project. The submission entitled "Lesbian History in Edmonton" introduces my research project and invites lesbians to participate in the oral history process. The purpose of the article is threefold. First, the article introduces the researcher to the prospective oral participants. Second, the one-page document points out just how vacuous the state of lesbian history is in Western Canada. Third, it mentions that writing a lesbian history is a collaborative process. Interviews not only enhance other sources, some information only surfaces through the oral history process.

The circulation of the newsletter extends the number of participants reached. As noted in the article, participants knew the project would examine identity, the development of lesbian networks, and participation in the Edmonton lesbian community. The article ensures privacy with the use of pseudonyms. The submission, along with successive visits to Edmonton, launched the oral history portion of this thesis.

Also, in this appendix, I have included a range of oral history interview questions specific to lesbian identity and the formation of the Edmonton gay and lesbian community. The questions served as a guideline for the interview process. The series of questions was written in conjunction with the University of Saskatchewan's Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research.

Figure 1. Lesbian History in Edmonton an invitation sent to members of Womonspace and the lesbian community to participate in a lesbian oral history project *Womonspace News* 1 no.1 (June, 1999)

Lesbian history in Edmonton

by Noelle Lucas

You are invited to participate in an oral history concerning lesbian culture and communities in Alberta.

In recent decades, the focus on gay and lesbian history has accelerated the research and writings of historians, sociologists and scholars in gender studies. However, the documentation on sexuality and sexual orientation in Canada is sparse and woefully incomplete. Even more so, is our knowledge of lesbian communities and lesbian culture in Western Canada. My research intends to address this gap by focusing on the 1970s to 1990s with an examination of lesbian communities, identities and cultural production in Edmonton and Calgary.

Beginning in the 1970s, a generation of women active in the feminist movement were among the first to openly declare themselves lesbians. These women, members of the postwar baby boom, lived through tremendous social changes brought about by second-wave feminism and civil rights movements. Today, the legacy of lesbian baby boomers has helped shape a culture set apart from the mainstream. Since then, a new generation of lesbians has come of age making significant changes of their own. My thesis intends to analyze the process of individual identity formation in relationship to the development of lesbian culture. I need to hear from both generations of

lesbians to identify the underlying themes significant to lesbians in Alberta.

By participating in an oral history, I can record information not found in written sources. Your stories of coming out, how you came to identify yourself as a lesbian, and how participation in "the lesbian community" and lesbian social groups like Womonspace are essential to lesbian history. This oral history project begins with a group discussion which I will tape on Friday, June 4, at 7:30 p.m. at the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre. Individual interviews will be arranged at a further date for those who express interest. My thesis utilizes pseudonyms to protect personal privacy unless you personally request otherwise. ▼

Noelle Lucas is a lesbian working on a Master's degree in Canadian history at the University of Saskatchewan. For further information contact her at noelle_lucas@hotmail.com

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Figure 2. Pp. 131-134 Consists of a series of questions related to lesbian identity and the lesbian community for oral interview subjects.

Questions

A. Biographical Information:

1. Describe your background. Please include your age, marital status, education, religious/ethnic identity as well as your occupation.

B. Sexual Identity:

2. How would you describe your sexual identity?

3. What does being a "lesbian" mean to you?

4. Did you define yourself as heterosexual prior to coming to identify yourself as a lesbian?

5. When did you come to identify yourself as a lesbian?

6. Do you claim to be a lesbian-feminist? If so explain

7. Is being a lesbian a political act for you? Has it ever been?

8. Did you ever see yourself as a lesbian-separatist? If so explain

C. "Coming Out"

9. Can you recall what your earliest feelings about lesbianism were?

10. At what age did you first recognize your attraction to women?

11. Describe what it was like for you coming out.

12. What support systems did you have at the time? [i.e family, friends, community]

13. Who are you out to? [i.e family, a select number of friends, co-workers]

14. Have you ever experienced any form of harassment, homophobia or direct discrimination as a result of your sexual orientation?

C. Lesbian Community:

15. Would you say that you are part of a lesbian community?

16. If so, what does that community represent to you?

17. How has that community changed over time?
18. How important is maintaining contact with the lesbian community to you socially?
19. What social events have you participated with in the lesbian community?

D. Dynamics between gay men and lesbians:

20. Have you ever socialized in the gay clubs of Edmonton? If so, describe what it was like for you.
21. How would you describe the relationship of gay men and lesbians who socialized in the bars together?
22. Have you participated in organized gay and lesbian groups in Edmonton other than Womonspace? If so explain
23. How would you describe the relationships between gay men and lesbians in organized gay groups?

E. Womonspace:

24. What do you see as being the central objectives of Womonspace?
25. How did you meet other lesbians in the community before Womonspace came along?
26. Are you a member of Womonspace, or have you ever been a member of Womonspace?
27. When did you first hear about Womonspace and what brought you there?
28. Have you ever been a member of the Board? If so in what capacity?
29. Have you volunteered your time with the organization and if so, in what capacity?
30. How did the organization go about building a viable lesbian population in Edmonton?
31. What does Womonspace do for you socially that differs from other organizations in the gay/lesbian community?
32. How did the Womonspace dances effect the greater lesbian community?
33. How has Womonspace increased the number of social activities available to lesbians living in Edmonton or near Edmonton?

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34. Have you experienced discordance or dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the organization? If so, explain.
35. Do you see the organization as making a political stand or not?
36. Have you ever been involved politically around such issues as lesbian and lesbian/gay rights. If so, in what capacity?
37. What are some of the major accomplishments of the organization?
38. Have there been any setbacks over the years or major disagreements amongst the members of Womonspace that have created internal problems?
39. What experiences have you had as a result of your participation in Womonspace?
40. How have things changed over the years at Womonspace?
41. How important is the newsletter to the organization's objectives?
42. Who determines what gets printed in the newsletter and what is left out?
43. A number of debates are issued in the newsletter concerning such topics as pornography, having strippers at dances and the treatment of lesbians in local gay clubs. What recollection of these matters do you have if any?
44. How has the newsletter served the lesbian community of Edmonton?
45. Who subscribes to *Womonspace News*? What does your readership look like?
46. Do you see Womonspace as a feminist organization or a non-feminist organization. Explain
47. What political activities has Womonspace taken part in?
48. Have there been problems experienced by the organization between lesbians who wanted to take the membership into a political direction and the core membership whose objectives were mainly social?
49. How has the organization dealt with criticism from feminist political groups who view the social objectives of Womonspace as trivial?
50. Has anyone ever been expelled from the organization. If so, why?
51. Womonspace has attracted a number of rural lesbians. How did these women hear about the

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organization?

52. If you are a rural lesbian what was that experience like for you?

53. Are members of the organization primarily working-class, blue-collar or middle-class, college educated?

55. Are there members who are primarily closeted in the organization? If so, what steps has Womonspace taken to ensure the privacy of these individuals?

56. How has the organization managed to find itself over the years?

57. Was there at any point and time a serious financial problem?

58. What do you see as being the legacy of Womonspace?

APPENDIX III RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

The contents of this appendix features my application requesting permission for the oral history component of my thesis. The research protocols are in compliance with the University Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research at the University of Saskatchewan. An approval of my study is featured along with the exact contents of my proposal. Also included are a series of interview questions in the proposal for participants of this research project.

Figure 1. Pp. 136-140 concerns my oral history project in compliance with the University Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research.

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FILE 03

Protocol of Oral History Research

THESIS /RESEARCH PROJECT OF NOELLE M. LUCAS, B.F.A, B.A

"Womonspace: All Things Social to All Gay Women- Building A Lesbian Community In Edmonton, Alberta, 1972-1990"

1. Researcher: Noelle, M. Lucas
Master's Student
Department of History
University of Saskatchewan
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Sk S7N 5A5
306-966-5990

Home Address: 769 Kingsmore Cres. S.W
Calgary, AB
T2V 2H9
403-212-4024

2. Title: "Womonspace: All Things Social to All Gay Women- Building A Lesbian Community In Edmonton, Alberta, 1972-1990"

3. Abstract: This thesis presents the history of a lesbian organization known as "Womonspace" located in Edmonton, Alberta and focuses on the social, cultural and political directives of the group. The central focus of Womonspace is to build a visible lesbian community by offering social and recreational activities for lesbians rather than organizing around gay rights issues. The organization became a society in 1981 and serves as an alternative to more established gay male organizations and clubs. The primary focus of my thesis involves the recollections and analysis of oral history interviews from past and present members of the organization. The oral histories fulfill a key component of my research process. In addition to the oral history interviews this project includes archival and written material to enlarge my thesis findings. Three depositories are examined: The City of Edmonton Public Archives, Saskatchewan Archives Board, and the Glenbow Archives in Calgary, Alberta. Of similar importance, is a detailed analysis of Womonspace News, the publication put out by the members of the organization. This source has been provided to me by the present editor of the newsletter and is of utmost importance to my research. The objectives of my M.A thesis is to contribute to the history of sexuality in Canada by presenting a history of an established prairie lesbian cultural and community group. Our knowledge of lesbian history on the prairies is sparse and woefully incomplete. Thus, this research project will help to extend the scholarship of gay and lesbian history in Western Canada.

4. Funding: This thesis is self-funded with no support from granting agencies since it comprises

graduate work towards a Master's degree in history at the University of Saskatchewan. However, a Master Travel Fund amounting to \$1500 was awarded to myself in 1996 before the research stages of this thesis began.

5. **Subjects:** Adult members of Womanspace will be notified of the possibility of participating in this oral history project through the website provided by the organization and as advertised in their newsletter *Womanspace News*. In addition, potential interviews are located by social networks (i.e word of mouth) as one member of the organization solicits the participation of other past and present members. Potential interview subjects are usually prominent members of the board, volunteers and members of the organization itself. Most notably, the founding members form the greater portion of the interviews itself. Also, members active in other Education gay and lesbian organizations such as GATLE (Gays Towards Equality) and GALA (Gay and Lesbian Alliance) are welcome to participate.

6. **Methods and Procedures:** The oral history component of my thesis is based on informed consent and according to the guidelines of the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research. Those individuals who wish to participate will be asked beforehand if they are willing to have their recollections and observations tape recorded. If not, they have the option of having myself (Nicole Lucas) make written notes instead. If neither of these options suffice individuals may e-mail me their thoughts and personal experiences as members of Womanspace as long as they have agreed to informed consent. Individuals may contact me by e-mail since my e-mail address has been made available to the newsletter and on the Womanspace web page. Please see "Questions," beginning on page 7.

7. **Risk or Discomfort:** No one in this study is obligated to participate. Participation is strictly on a voluntary basis. This thesis supports the definition of "minimal risk" as provided by the "Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans." The policy states: "the standard of minimal risk is commonly defined as follows: If potential subjects can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research to be no greater than those encountered by the subject in those aspects of his or her everyday life that relate to the research then the research can be regarded as within the range of minimal risk." Absolutely no deception is to take place in the interview process. Potential oral participants will be made completely aware of the theme and subject matter of this thesis project. In addition, participants are not required to answer all questions asked of them. Once more they have the right to end the interview at anytime and terminate their participation in the oral history project if they so desire.

8. **Confidentiality:** To ensure confidentiality and anonymity informants will be given a number of choices in regard to confidentiality of the information they choose to provide. First, they have the right to be identified by an alias if they so choose. Secondly, participants have the right to restrict their participation to specific questions. If informants decide to answer a particular question they have the right to choose how they will be identified. For instance, they may choose to identify by name in response to one particular question and choose to be identified by gender, orientation,

ago or by an alias in relation to another question.

Informants will be provided with an accurate account pertaining to the archiving of their oral history transcripts, written notes or e-mail answers to this thesis project. Furthermore options as outlined in the University of Saskatchewan guidelines include a consent form which will be distributed to each oral history participant prior to proceeding with the oral history component of Lucas's thesis. The information for the participant "to the informant" as well as a signed copy of the Consent Form will be provided to each informant for her/his retention.

9. **Consent:** The undertaking of consent, which all informants will be supplied with at the start of the interview process is duplicated here. All informants will be presented with this information, and then asked to sign a consent form at the termination of the interview.

To the informant:

You are being asked to provide information to a series of questions concerning contemporary history of lesbian communities in Edmonton, Alberta from the 1970's onward with the consideration to your participation and membership in Womanspace. This thesis research project is being conducted by Noelle M. Lucas, a graduate student with the University of Saskatchewan and the Department of History. The oral interview component of this project as well as research findings will be presented in Ms. Lucas's thesis towards a Master's degree in history. The oral interviews are combined with archival material found in previously collected material to shape the evidence from which Lucas will produce a thesis. The completed thesis is intended for academic audiences to be on hand in dissertation/thesis abstracts with at least one bound copy available at the University of Saskatchewan. The final research project may also provide potential conference presentations and academic articles. The interviews and research found in Lucas's work will be an important source of information about lesbian communities and culture in Alberta, Canada.

It is important to emphasize that your participation in this project is completely voluntary. Interviewers should take no more than one to two hours of your time. If you decide not to participate you are free to end the interview at any time. If you are willing to provide an oral interview you will be presented with a consent form at the end of the interview process to indicate how you want Lucas to manage the records of the interview at the conclusion of this thesis/research project. In addition, you do not have to answer all questions posed to you and may freely decline to answer any question or question(s). Again, you may terminate the interview at any stage of the interview process. If you choose to suspend the interview process all previous information you have provided will be discarded and the material will be destroyed.

The researcher, Noelle M. Lucas maintains that this thesis project will not cause you any harm in any way. If the unlikely chance that harm presents itself you will be informed and asked if you are still willing to contribute to this project. Participants who do not want to be identified will be given aliases to protect identities.

If you decide to participate, you have the right to say whether you are willing to have the conversation tape-recorded or if you prefer Lucas to write notes instead. In the event that you choose written notes over a taped-recording you may request a photocopy of the notes made by Lucas during the conversation to be mailed to you after the interview is conducted.

If you agree to participate, you can restrict the use of the information you provide. You can decide to be identified as the source of the information or if you prefer you can have Lucas use the information without identifying you by name as the person who provided it. In this case, it would be necessary to identify your group (e.g. a lesbian from Edmonton, a member of Womanspace, a former member of Womanspace and approximately age) since the information is important to whoever reads Lucas's thesis. In that event, an alias will be selected. In addition, you can choose to limit Lucas's use of a particular answer or answer, to anonymous (with the exception of being identified by gender, orientation, organization and approximate age). You may also choose to be anonymous on the use of information provided to one question or set of questions while leaving the information you provide to the rest of the questions unrestricted.

A final note, if you agree to be interviewed, you will be providing significant assistance to this thesis project.

If you need independent advice about participating in Lucas's thesis/research project, you may direct your questions to the Director of Research Services at the University of Saskatchewan. Her name is:

Ms. Jella Taylor
Director of Research Services
University of Saskatchewan
117 Science Place
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5C8
telephone: 306-966-8597

Do you agree that I can ask you questions and record them for my thesis project?

Do you acknowledge that you have been provided with a copy of the participant information "to the informant" as well as a signed copy of the Consent Form for your records?

At the conclusion of the interview I will ask you how you want me to treat the tape (s) or notes (if any) of that interview after the thesis project is concluded.

Thank you, your participation is greatly appreciated.

10. Debriefing and Feedback: The notice to informants includes information about how the research in which they have participated will be made available to academic audiences. Informants

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are encouraged to contact Lucas for updates and progress towards the completion of her thesis project. Since there is no deceit involved in the oral history process, a conventional "debriefing" is not necessary. Nonetheless, Lucas will be happy to keep participants abreast of the progress of her project and her research findings to the date of the interview.

11. Signatures:

Noëlle M. Lucas
Graduate Student,
Department of History
University of Saskatchewan

Dr. Valerie J. Korinek
Assistant Professor
Department of History
University of Saskatchewan

Dr. Larry Stewart
Professor and Head
Department of History
University of Saskatchewan

Figure 2. This is a copy of the consent form all oral participants signed in compliance with university guidelines.

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CONSENT FORM

Please indicate "yes" or "no" in the appropriate places beside the statement and sign both copies of this form. One of the signed copies will be left with you.

- ☐ I agree to be interviewed and to have the interview recorded as part of the research for a project being undertaken by Noelle M. Lucas for her thesis on Women's spaces and the Edmonton lesbian community from 1970-1990. I understand that I am free to discontinue the interview at any point. If you choose to discontinue the interview all of the previous information you have provided will be excluded from the study, and the material will be destroyed.
- ☐ I agree that my recollections may be used fully in the research project.
- ☐ I agree that all my answers except those questions listed below may be used fully. Those excluded answers may
 - ☐ be used without attribution to me. (Question [s] #)
 - ☐ not be used in any form. (Question [s] #)
- ☐ I agree that Lucas may use my recollections without identifying me directly by name (but by giving my gender, approximate age, sexual orientation, and community, and by using an alias)
- ☐ I agree that Lucas has provided me with a copy of the participant information, entitled "To the informant" as well as a signed copy of the Consent Form for my records.

[Regulations at the University of Saskatchewan require researchers to keep research records for five years after completion of the research project in case there is any dispute about the researcher's use or interpretation of the data. After the materials are deposited in a public archives, any researcher with a valid reason to do so may examine them.]

When Lucas has completed the project and is ready to dispose of the research materials, I want the records of my interview

- ☐ deposited in an archives that Lucas thinks is appropriate OR
- ☐ deposited in the following repository that I have chosen:
- _____ OR
- ☐ destroyed.

Name

Place

Date

Noelle M. Lucas (Researcher), Department of History, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A5, tel. 306-966-5990; fax. 306-966-5852 Home Address: 769 Kensington Cres, S.W. Calgary, Alberta,

Figure 3. University Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research approval for oral history project

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**UNIVERSITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ON ETHICS IN BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

NAME: V. Korinek (N. Lucas)
Department of History

BSC#: 2000-02

DATE: February 24, 2000

The University Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Womanspace: All Things Social to All Gay Women - Building A Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1972 1990" (2002).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed study should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 3 years.

I wish you a successful and informative study.

Valerie Thompson, Chair
University Advisory Committee
on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research

VT/bjk

Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan
Kirk Hall Room 210, 117 Science Place, Saskatoon SK S7N 5C5 CANADA
Telephone: (306) 966-8878 Facsimile: (306) 966-8887 <http://www.usask.ca/research/>

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